PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES

(HANSARD)

SIXTH SERIES—VOLUME 332

HOUSE OF COMMONS

OFFICIAL REPORT

SECOND SESSION OF THE FIFTY-SECOND PARLIAMENT
OF THE UNITED KINGDOM OF GREAT BRITAIN
AND NORTHERN IRELAND
FORTY-EIGHTH YEAR OF THE REIGN OF
HER MAJESTY QUEEN ELIZABETH II

SESSION 1998–99

COMPRISING PERIOD
24 May—11 June 1999

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24 May 1999

THE
PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES
OFFICIAL REPORT

IN THE SECOND SESSION OF THE FIFTY-SECOND PARLIAMENT OF THE
UNITED KINGDOM OF GREAT BRITAIN AND NORTHERN IRELAND
[WHICH OPENED 7 MAY 1997]

FORTY-EIGHTH YEAR OF THE REIGN OF
HER MAJESTY QUEEN ELIZABETH II

SIXTH SERIES **VOLUME 332**

TENTH VOLUME OF SESSION 1998–99

House of Commons

Monday 24 May 1999

The House met at half-past Two o'clock

PRAYERS

[MADAM SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

Oral Answers to Questions

SOCIAL SECURITY

The Secretary of State was asked—

Benefits Agency Staff

1. **Dr. Norman A. Godman** (Greenock and Inverclyde): How many staff are employed in Benefits Agency offices *(a)* in Inverclyde and *(b)* in Scotland as a whole; and what was the equivalent figure in (i) 1990, (ii) 1993 and (iii) 1996. [83991]

The Secretary of State for Social Security (Mr. Alistair Darling): At 30 April 1999, the number of BA staff employed in Inverclyde was 242. The number in Scotland was 6,966.

I am unable to provide further information in the form that my hon. Friend has requested due to district reorganisations. Unfortunately, the figures for Scotland are not available for 1993. Before 1990, there was no Benefits Agency.

Dr. Godman: Those recent figures sound encouraging enough. Jack Martin and his team of officials have my respect, especially the local customer relations officers, Liz McArthur and Margaret Mitchell, but I have received representations concerning the number of doctors and support staff who carry out medical examinations to determine the award of incapacity and other benefits. Is it true that their number is still too low for the number of examinations that they have to carry out? I hope that my right hon. Friend will dismiss the idea that the Sema Group, which carries out that work for the Benefits Agency, is screwing down the number employed to maximise profits. That would be detrimental to our constituents, who have to wait far too long as it is for such medical examinations.

Mr. Darling: We keep the number of medical staff throughout the country under review. I am not aware of there being a particular problem in Greenock or in the surrounding area, but I will happily look into it for my hon. Friend.

My hon. Friend may be interested to know that we are recruiting 64 members of staff as part of the new single gateway to the benefits system. One of its pilot projects is operating on the Clyde coast, so he will know about it. I thank him for his compliments to the staff; I know that he has written to them and has been extremely supportive of everything they do. They appreciate that.

Benefits Fraud

2. **Dr. Stephen Ladyman** (South Thanet): What progress has been made in improving co-ordination between the Benefits Agency and local authorities in combating fraud. [83992]

The Minister of State, Department of Social Security (Mr. Stephen Timms): There is good progress on a range of fronts. We have earmarked funding in each Benefits Agency area to help to build stronger links with local authorities. Last month, the Benefits Agency and local

authorities were invited to submit joint proposals for projects to tackle fraud together. Service level agreements are in place giving each party a clear statement of how co-operation should work in practice. Among other initiatives, we have, so far, installed more than 300 remote access terminals to allow local authorities access to Department of Social Security benefits data.

Dr. Ladyman: I thank my hon. Friend for that answer. Is he aware that Thanet district council has recently been commended by the benefit fraud inspectorate for its work to prevent and to detect fraud? That accolade was earned after much hard work and as a result of being able to put resources into fraud detection and prevention, which includes co-operation with the Benefits Agency. If the system of weekly benefit savings is to be replaced, will he assure me that the new system will continue to provide councils such as Thanet with the resources that it needs to co-operate with the Benefits Agency and to invest in such fraud detection and prevention?

Mr. Timms: I can give my hon. Friend that assurance. I commend the achievements of Thanet district council in tackling fraud. Indeed, I commend the efforts of my hon. Friend, who was the chair of finance at that local authority when the lamentable record of the Conservative administration at Thanet was being turned round.

A commendation from the benefit fraud inspectorate is based on careful and thorough analysis; it is not lightly given. Last week, I visited the BFI headquarters and was able to see for myself the thoroughness and detailed preparation that go into its important work in all the local authorities that are inspected.

As in the case of Thanet, the WBS—weekly benefit savings—system has encouraged local authorities to allocate adequate resources to the detection of fraud. That is to be welcomed. We will continue to use WBS with local authorities for some time yet, but we also need to encourage work on prevention; WBS focuses on detection. That is the central purpose of the verification framework, and we are funding local authorities £100 million to implement it.

Mr. Edward Leigh (Gainsborough): One of the best ways in which to combat fraud would be to automate the payment of benefits, but that has been the subject of a long-standing dispute between the Department of Trade and Industry and the Department of Social Security. Will the Minister honestly say what has happened to the ICL contract? We gain lots of information from unattributable briefings to the press. Will he come openly to the House and explain what is going on?

Mr. Timms: There have been a number of delays with the Horizon project and against that background, the Government commissioned a substantial review of the project, which began last year. Everyone involved—ICL, Post Office Counters Ltd, as well as the Department of Social Security—has been looking again at the project to find a way in which everyone can make a commitment to it. I understand that we can expect an announcement about it from the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry later today.

Minimum Pension Guarantee

3. **Helen Jones** (Warrington, North): What estimate he has made of the number of people in Warrington, North who will benefit from the minimum pension guarantee.

[83993]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Social Security (Angela Eagle): We estimate that approximately 2,000 pensioners will benefit from the minimum income guarantee in Warrington, North. The increases in income support rates for pensioners will mean that, this year, in real terms, a single pensioner could be approximately £160 better off.

Helen Jones: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for that reply. Will she tell the House whether it is the Government's intention that, if possible, the minimum pension guarantee will be uprated in line with average earnings? If so, does it not highlight the contrast between the Government's policy of protecting the poorest pensioners, and the Opposition's policy of abolishing that minimum income guarantee?

Angela Eagle: My hon. Friend is right to point out that the Government's priority is to protect the most vulnerable pensioners, which is why we have been focusing money on them in the way that I have just described. She was also correct to have noticed that the Chancellor announced that we intend, next year, to uprate the minimum income guarantee in line with earnings.

Mr. Julian Brazier (Canterbury): Will the Minister confirm that, under those arrangements, according to which the minimum income guarantee is pegged to earnings, whereas the basic pension is pegged to prices, the proportion of people in Warrington, North and across the United Kingdom who are dependent on means-tested benefits will rise indefinitely year on year?

Angela Eagle: The hon. Gentleman talks about means testing, but omits to mention that, in 1979—when the Tories took control of Government—16 per cent. of all benefits were means-tested whereas, in May 1997, when they were finally driven from office, that figure had risen to 34 per cent. Therefore, we need absolutely no lessons from Conservative Members about means testing. The hon. Gentleman should remember that the Government's priority is to ensure that we get help now to those who need it now. The minimum income guarantee will focus real extra resources on those who need them most.

Mr. Steve Webb (Northavon): May I transport the Minister to Warrington, North, in the year 2064—which is the year in which constituents of the hon. Member for Warrington, North (Helen Jones) who are born this year will reach state pension age? Will the Minister confirm that, under current policy, the combined value of the full basic state pension and the full state second pension for those people will be below the value of the proposed minimum income guarantee? Does she accept that that proves that the Government's policy is unsustainable?

Angela Eagle: The hon. Gentleman should stop transporting in time, and start examining the very important changes that we are making to pension

provision to ensure that we float off means-tested benefit all those who work a full working life—plus people who care. The state second pension will achieve that goal.

Mr. Bob Blizzard (Waveney): May I welcome the proposal in the pensions Green Paper to examine ways of helping pensioners in Warrington, North and elsewhere whose small second pension takes them just above income support levels and therefore just beyond eligibility for the minimum income guarantee? Many of those pensioners feel that, despite their modest savings, they are little or no better off than those who are on income support and qualify for other benefits. Will my hon. Friend say when the Government might make such proposals?

Angela Eagle: My hon. Friend is exactly right to say that, paradoxically, those who have small occupational pensions and find themselves just above income support levels often end up worse off because they do not receive passported benefits. It is a very difficult issue of public policy, which we are examining. As he will know, we have announced a review of the capital limit, and shall make an announcement on that when we are able to do so.

Benefits Fraud

4. **Mr. Michael Jack** (Fylde): When he last reviewed his target for the reduction of benefit fraud for the year 1999–2000. [83994]

The Secretary of State for Social Security (Mr. Alistair Darling): For the first time, we have set a measurable target for reducing fraud and error. Our target is to reduce the level of fraud and error in income support and jobseeker's allowance by at least 30 per cent. by 2007, with at least a 10 per cent. reduction by March 2002.

Mr. Jack: I am grateful to the Secretary of State for that answer. Pursuant to the reply, a moment ago, of the Minister of State—on the ICL computer project, and the fact that an announcement on it may be made today—may I have the Secretary of State's assurance that, whatever the outcome of his deliberations on a project which has a key part to play in the fight against fraud and inaccuracy, Britain's 23,000 sub-postmasters and postmistresses will continue to have an opportunity to play a key role in the front-line fight against fraud?

Mr. Darling: Yes, I can give the right hon. Gentleman that assurance. Later today, my colleague, the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry, will be making a statement on the matter—

Mr. Leigh: To the House?

Mr. Darling: No, he will not be making it to the House. *[Interruption.]* I can tell the right hon. Member for Fylde (Mr. Jack) that the problem with the project—which we inherited from the previous Government—is that it is three years late, and that its costs were being overrun. Because of that, my colleagues and I conducted a lengthy review of the project to ensure that we had a system that reduced fraud and errors while helping to safeguard the post office network for the future. I am pleased that we have reached an agreement between all the parties. It is a good deal for the Post Office and an extremely good deal for the Benefits Agency.

Mr. Eric Forth (Bromley and Chislehurst): On a point of order, Madam Speaker.

Madam Speaker: Order. I cannot take points of order until the end of Question Time. *[Interruption.]* Order. The right hon. Member for Fylde (Mr. Jack) knows what action he can take if he finds the answer unsatisfactory.

Mr. Dale Campbell-Savours (Workington): My hon. Friend the Minister of State referred to the benefit card. Did my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State read the interesting article in *The Sunday Times* yesterday that suggested that the national identity card that some of us have been calling for might be announced in the near future? Might that be true, and has the Department of Social Security had any influence over any decision that might be forthcoming?

Mr. Darling: I read lots of things in the newspapers, some of which are true and some of which are not. That matter of policy is the responsibility of my right hon. Friend the Home Secretary.

Mr. Iain Duncan Smith (Chingford and Woodford Green): The Secretary of State talks about the pathway project knowing that his Department has had a massive involvement in it, but he gives us no information on the situation. Briefings have been given to the *Daily Mail*, as we saw on Saturday, and to *The Independent*, in which the Government have deliberately undermined the programme. A written answer by the right hon. Member for Birkenhead (Mr. Field), when he was a Minister, gave no indication of any problems. He said that the programme would be up and running by the end of the year 2000. Last week, the current Minister of State said the same. Now we are told that the Government are going to make a statement, but not to the House. Will the right hon. Gentleman tell us the current situation on the programme? Let us hear the answer here first.

Mr. Darling: I think that we have had enough of the hon. Gentleman's synthetic anger about this. Let me repeat that this is another example of our discovering, on coming to office, that a project begun by the previous Government was not working. It was running three years late. That is why we had to review it to ensure two objectives. The first is to safeguard the post office network, which we have done. That is the responsibility of my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry. The second was to ensure that we can make payments as effectively, cheaply and efficiently as possible to Benefits Agency customers. We have sorted out the mess. If the hon. Gentleman wants further information in the House or elsewhere, it is perfectly possible for him to get it through the usual channels, as he knows full well.

Mr. Duncan Smith: The usual channels have twice produced anodyne answers, such as the statement that the programme is due to go ahead with no problems. Never has there been an admission of a problem in a written answer. The Government are prepared to brief the press

about problems, but not once do they say anything to the House. Will the Secretary of State take the opportunity to pledge at the Dispatch Box that, as a result of whatever decision that the Government make, pensioners and disabled people will still be able to receive their full range of benefits, as was the plan, through local post offices?

Mr. Darling: Yes of course they will, as they can at the moment. I repeat that the project was three years late and was not working. That is why the Government had to review it. We have had long discussions with ICL, the supplier. The hon. Gentleman would hardly expect those discussions to be taking place on the front pages of the newspapers.

Mr. Duncan Smith: The right hon. Gentleman briefed the papers.

Mr. Darling: The hon. Gentleman must contain himself, particularly when he is making wild and unsubstantiated allegations. We are acting in the best interests of the Benefits Agency and the post office network to ensure that we get payments into the hands of people who are entitled to them, to reduce the amount of fraud and error in the system and safeguard the post office network. When people see the announcement later today, they will understand that we have protected the public interest, unlike the Conservative party.

War Pensions

6. **Mr. Andrew Dismore** (Hendon): What plans he has to improve the take–up of war pensions among ex–service personnel and civilians injured by hostile acts in world war two. [83996]

The Parliamentary Under–Secretary of State for Social Security (Mr. Hugh Bayley): We are committed to ensuring that those who are entitled to war pensions receive them and we are actively looking at ways of improving our communication with ex-service men, such as the use of a claims telephone helpline.

Take-up is assured for those ex-service men who leave the forces on health grounds and for the families of those who die in service as, under arrangements between this Department and the Ministry of Defence, neither they nor their widows have to claim. In addition, the War Pensions Agency will arrange for a member of its welfare service to visit any recently bereaved widow of a war pensioner within 15 days of a request to do so and help her make any appropriate claim.

Mr. Dismore: Does my hon. Friend share my experience from constituency surgeries, which suggests that many veterans or civilians injured in the second world war who did not claim war pensions at the time, but who now find that their injuries are becoming more severe as they get on in years, may not be aware that they are entitled to claim those pensions? That is particularly the case among civilians who were injured. Will he pay particular attention in the review to trying to bring those rights to the attention of those affected?

Mr. Bayley: The war pensions scheme for civilians applied only to the second world war and is now largely finished. The scheme had a time limit for claims of three months from the date on which the injury causing the disablement was sustained; however, the Secretary of State has the discretion to waive that limit in certain circumstances. These days, 50 years after the end of the war, we still get a small number of applications each year for such waivers to be made. That facet of the scheme, as well as all other parts of it, is advertised as widely as possible through leaflets and posters in some 13,000 outlets around the country. The scheme is also advertised in every telephone directory, and in many other ways. We always look to make sure that those who are entitled to a war pension have every opportunity to claim and receive it.

Mr. Nicholas Soames (Mid–Sussex): Is the hon. Gentleman aware that probably the best network for reaching war widows and others who may be entitled to war pensions is via regimental and corps associations? Will he confirm that, in addition to the work that his Department does with the Royal British Legion, it tries to ensure that all the regimental associations, which do so much for the welfare and benefit of old comrades and their families, are kept fully in touch about the benefits to which those people are entitled?

Mr. Bayley: I can confirm that we work with the regimental associations, and we issue leaflets and posters to regimental museums. We make sure that all those who leave the armed forces are given information about how to claim, should they need to do so at some time in the future.

Mr. Eric Pickles (Brentwood and Ongar): The hon. Gentleman will be aware that there is a degree of confusion at the heart of Government about the relationship between war widows pensions and housing benefit. He will recall that, on 20 May last year, at column 952 of the *Official Report*, the Prime Minister, in response to a reasonable question from the hon. Member for Thurrock (Mr. Mackinlay), promised a review of that relationship. This year, on 12 May, at column 315 of the *Official Report*, I asked the right hon. Gentleman what had been done about that review, and was given a contradictory answer. The following day, the Leader of the House gave another contradictory view, saying that responsibility for the matter had been transferred to the Deputy Prime Minister. Will the hon. Gentleman give us a definitive reason why nothing has happened in a whole year, despite the Prime Minister's promise? Is the indecision of the Government final on this matter?

Mr. Bayley: The hon. Gentleman is as well aware as I am—not least because of his links with Yorkshire and the campaigning of the *Yorkshire Post*—that the discretion lies with the local authority in that matter. As a member of my Department, I know that, under the law as it stands, the discretion lies with the local authority.

Benefits Take-Up

7. **Mr. David Kidney** (Stafford): What steps he is taking to ensure that all pensioners receive the benefits to which they are entitled. [83997]

The Minister of State, Department of Social Security (Mr. Stephen Timms): We are particularly concerned about pensioners being worse off than they need to be because they are not receiving the help to which they are entitled through the minimum income guarantee. The pilot projects that we set up last year were designed to test new ways of identifying potential beneficiaries and the best way of encouraging them to claim. We will examine the results when they become available and make proposals as soon as we are in a position to do so.

Mr. Kidney: Does my hon. Friend agree that the minimum income guarantee's future reliability depends on ensuring that pensioners claim the income support to which they are entitled? Is he aware that South Staffordshire district, part of which lies in my constituency, was one of the pilot areas? Can he confirm that often pensioners who do not claim their income support entitlement nevertheless claim other help, such as council tax benefit and housing benefit? Will he instil into all Benefits Agency staff the approach that pensioners who come to them who are entitled to receive income support will indeed receive it?

Mr. Timms: My hon. Friend is absolutely right: the minimum income guarantee is an entitlement. Like him, I am interested in the fact that more people seem willing to claim council tax benefit and housing benefit, even though they are means-tested, than are willing to claim the minimum income guarantee. There are some important lessons for us to learn. We look forward to the results of the pilots in his area and in others so that we can find out what those lessons are.

Members of Parliament should take the opportunities that we have to point out to people that the minimum income guarantee is an entitlement. Tomorrow morning, I shall participate in a virtual conference for older people, on-line with older people throughout the country, taking advantage of the fact that many of them are internet users. I have no doubt that the minimum income guarantee will be one of the many subjects raised.

Mrs. Caroline Spelman (Meriden): I am sure that many hon. Members will have received visits in their surgeries from pensioners rendered very anxious by the extension of means testing to incapacity benefit, widows benefit and other basic state benefits, through the introduction of the minimum income guarantee. How does the Secretary of State intend to deal with the disincentive to save that the measures will produce?

Mr. Timms: There is no disincentive to save. We want to ensure that even the least well-off pensioners in our society can share in the benefits of rising national prosperity. The increases in the minimum income guarantee this year and next will mean an extra £250 a year for a single pensioner on income support, and up to £400 for a couple in which one partner is over 80. Those are large sums that can make a significant difference to the least well-off pensioners in our society.

Through the state second pension, in combination with the minimum income guarantee, we are ensuring that all those who work and contribute throughout their lives will, when they retire, receive an income above the level of the minimum income guarantee. Those two measures in tandem mean that we can ensure that there are good incentives to save but that the least well-off pensioners will share in our rising national prosperity.

Mr. Malcolm Wicks (Croydon, North): Does my hon. Friend have a recent estimate of the number of elderly people not claiming means-tested income support? Are there any early indications—either virtual or non-virtual—from the pilot schemes? What is the target for the number not claiming that entitlement in 10 years' time? Does he agree that if we are to have a genuine pension guarantee we must find more sensitive and effective ways of ensuring that every person who is entitled to income support—many are in their 80s or 90s—actually gets it?

Mr. Timms: I have much in common with my hon. Friend on this point. We estimate that between 400,000 and 700,000 pensioners are entitled to the minimum income guarantee but have not claimed it. We are reviewing the figures, and we expect to have revised figures by the summer. We are considering a range of approaches to the problem. It is interesting to note that in some areas the take-up of housing benefit and council tax benefit is as high as 95 per cent., but the take-up rate for the minimum income guarantee among the same population is a good deal lower.

We are not setting a target for the take-up in 10 years' time, but we are anxious, through new methods such as telephone claims, which will make claiming easier, to ensure that as many pensioners as possible receive the minimum income guarantee to which they are entitled.

Mr. Quentin Davies (Grantham and Stamford): My hon. Friend the Member for Meriden (Mrs. Spelman) referred to anxiety caused to pensioners by Government policies. Will not much more gratuitous anxiety have been caused to millions of pensioners who collect their benefits from post offices, and to post office staff, by the Secretary of State's reluctant admission just now at the Dispatch Box, which was dragged out of him by my hon. Friend the Member for Chingford and Woodford Green (Mr. Duncan Smith), that the pathway project was facing problems? There were two disgraceful, unsatisfactory and unacceptable aspects to that admission. First, if it is true that there had been problems for several years, why was my hon. Friend given a deceptive parliamentary answer last week on the pathway project that did not mention any problems? Secondly, why did the Secretary of State say that the answer to the question will be given not by him but by some other Minister in a different context? The people of this country will begin to wonder why we waste our time with Question Time if this Government intend systematically to bypass Parliament.

Mr. Timms: It is Conservative Members who are doing the scaremongering. My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State dealt fully with the point. My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry is responsible for the Post Office and that is why he will make the announcement later today.

Student Housing Allowances

8. **Mr. Tam Dalyell** (Linlithgow): What representations he has received on housing allowances for students from *(a)* Scotland and *(b)* England. [83998]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Social Security (Angela Eagle): We have received several representations concerning students' entitlement to housing benefit. Most full-time students are not entitled to housing benefit because they are supported through the educational maintenance system. Certain students in vulnerable groups, such as lone parents, can claim benefit.

Mr. Dalyell: In the light of the complex constituency case that was brought to the attention of my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State during his visit to the excellent Bathgate office of the Department, and in the light of the background with which my hon. Friend the Minister is familiar, is there any hope of improvement in the situation of those mature students who are, rightly or wrongly, dependent to some extent—possibly completely—on housing allowances for the continuance of their education at institutes of higher education where they are well received?

Angela Eagle: I am aware of the constituent's case to which my hon. Friend refers. He wished to take a full-time course, but had he taken a part-time course, he would still have had access to his housing benefit. He had been unemployed for three months which rendered him ineligible for new deal, which might have given him the opportunity to do a full-time course and still have access to benefit or to undertake training for work, for which an individual must be unemployed for six months. The training opportunities are focused on periods of unemployment of six months or two years to give assistance to those who have fallen out of the labour market to try to make them more employable. However, I hear what my hon. Friend says and we will bear it in mind during our review of housing benefit.

Miss Anne McIntosh (Vale of York): Has the Minister made an assessment of how many students will be eligible for housing allowances and benefits when the introduction of tuition fees takes effect? May I assure the House, Madam Speaker, that I am not a Labour rebel, as I was described in a leading newspaper last week, but that I am and remain a Conservative loyalist?

Angela Eagle: I am sure that the hon. Lady was glad to get that off her chest. Newspapers seem to think that any women Member of Parliament must be a Labour Member. I wonder why that is. I am not certain what point the hon. Lady was making about housing benefit. The only people who are entitled to receive housing benefit if they are studying are those in vulnerable groups. Lone parents qualify, but others would not.

Severe Disablement Allowance

10. **Mr. Christopher Fraser** (Mid-Dorset and North Poole): If he will make a statement on the proposed changes to severe disablement allowance. [84000]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Social Security (Mr. Hugh Bayley): The proposed changes to severe disablement allowance will give more help to those with the greatest need.

Young disabled people under the age of 20—or under 25 in the case of higher education students or trainees—will be given access to incapacity benefit without having to satisfy the usual contribution conditions. As a result, after one year on benefit, they will gain by up to £26.40 a week.

Mr. Fraser: The Government set up the disability benefits forum last year, but 12 major charities with interests in disability and severe disability have since resigned from it. How does the Minister explain that? The forum was described as giving the disabled a "pivotal" role in shaping policy. How does he intend to replace those important charities?

Mr. Bayley: Naturally, I regret that the charities withdrew from the forum. They have made an important contribution to the development of the Government's welfare reform proposals on disability benefits although, ultimately, there were areas of disagreement. That is perfectly obvious to the House, and it would be extraordinary if a Government followed each and every proposal made by the charities. Any hon. Member who had read the representations made in response to the consultation document would form that view, not least because on many occasions the charities argued for different things.

However, the Government will retain the working groups. They have been extremely useful, for instance, in shaping the alternative to the benefit integrity project. Those working group meetings continue and remain useful. The Government will stay in close touch with all the bodies representing disabled people, such as Mencap, which remained in the forum. It is important that we are in dialogue with those organisations.

Mr. David Rendel (Newbury): Does the Minister accept that the abolition of severe disablement allowance will hit especially hard those who in early adulthood have caring responsibilities for children, for people who are disabled, or for elderly parents? Such people often are unable to make national insurance contributions, and so are not eligible for incapacity benefit. If their marriage partners have incomes of their own, they probably will not be eligible for any means-tested benefits either. Is it not rather unfair that people who, through no fault of their own, become incapacitated after several years of looking after other people will get no recompense for their loss of earning capacity?

Mr. Bayley: If we were doing nothing for carers, the hon. Gentleman would be right, but we are doing a great deal for such people—as I should have thought the hon. Gentleman, who sat through the Committee proceedings on the Welfare Reform and Pensions Bill, would know. For example, we have taken the decision that all carers entitled to incapacity benefit will carry that entitlement through the period that they receive invalid care allowance for as long as is required. Also, carers will be credited into the state second pension. That will mean that, for the first time, people who forgo a job to care for a relative or some other person will not be left in poverty in retirement as a result.

Mr. Dafydd Wigley (Caernarfon): Does not the Minister accept that disabled people, and organisations of

and for disabled people, know most about their own needs? Does he not accept that the overwhelming weight of evidence given to the all-party disablement group and other Members of the House is against the Government's proposals? Last week's vote on the Welfare Reform and Pensions Bill indicated that there are grave reservations among Labour Members on this matter. Will the Government therefore think again when the Bill goes before the House of Lords?

Mr. Bayley: I wish the right hon. Gentleman would read the representations from the charities and other voluntary bodies in response to the Government's consultation document. They welcomed many of the things that the Government are doing. For instance, they strongly welcomed our decision to raise people who are disabled at birth or early in life above the level provided by the severe disablement allowance. Whereas 70 per cent. of those people used to be left on means-tested benefits for life, we are providing that they should be passported on to incapacity benefits. That will leave them about £26 a week better off.

The representations also welcomed our decision to extend the higher rate mobility component in disability living allowance to children of three and four years of age. The right hon. Gentleman should look at what the charities say, as they welcome most of what the Government propose.

Mrs. Theresa May (Maidenhead): As another female Conservative Member of Parliament, may I point out to the Minister how pleased I am to do something that too many of the Blair babes hardly ever do—stand up for disabled people and women? The Minister responded rather coyly to my hon. Friend the Member for Mid–Dorset and North Poole (Mr. Fraser), saying that there had been something of a disagreement between the former members of the disability forum and the Government. It was not just a disagreement: the disability organisations thought that the Government had got it wrong. We think so too, and so do 67 of the Minister's hon. Friends. When will the Government wake up to reality? Their changes to disability benefits are not the right thing for disabled people, but a betrayal of those people.

Mr. Bayley: There are few enough women Members on the Conservative Benches. It will not have escaped the memory of Members who were here before the general election that a woman Conservative Member tabled dozens of amendments to wreck a Bill, introduced by my hon. Friend the Member for Kingswood (Mr. Berry), which would have extended civil rights to disabled people. For Conservative Members to pose as people who support disabled people's rights is a travesty of the truth, and disabled people and the voluntary bodies which represent them know it.

Mr. David Winnick (Walsall, North): Does my hon. Friend remember how, in the previous Parliament, a Labour private Member's Bill to help the disabled was so badly wrecked by the Conservative Government that the daughter of the then Minister for the Disabled disowned what was being done, and the Minister himself resigned soon afterwards? Did not that incident show the Tory Government's total contempt for disabled people, and does it not expose the Tory party's present hypocrisy?

Mr. Bayley: It was a Labour Government who introduced the Commission for Racial Equality to provide civil rights for people regardless of their race. It was a Labour Government who introduced the Equal Opportunities Commission to do the same in respect of gender. The Conservatives blocked civil rights for disabled people, so it is a Labour Government who are introducing legislation that will set up a Disability Rights Commission to guarantee civil rights for disabled people.

Housing Benefit

11. **Mr. Chris Mullin** (Sunderland, South): What plans he has to increase local authority discretion in respect of the payment of housing benefit; and if he will make a statement. [84001]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Social Security (Angela Eagle): We have announced our intention to publish a housing Green Paper later in the year. A modern housing policy should ensure that everyone has the opportunity of a decent home. The Green Paper will discuss options to address weaknesses in the current system of housing and housing benefit within our overall objectives for welfare reform.

Mr. Mullin: Is the Minister aware that, in many areas, housing benefit has become a subsidy for some of the worst landlords? The interests of both taxpayer and tenant might be better served if local authorities were given some discretion over which kind of landlords were eligible to receive housing benefit. I appreciate that my hon. Friend may tell me that the benefit goes to the tenant, not the landlord, but she knows that, although that happens in theory, in practice the money often goes directly to the landlord without touching the tenant's pocket.

Angela Eagle: My hon. Friend makes an important point, and we will consider it in our overall review. In November 1997, we introduced more discretion for local authorities to stop direct payment to landlords who are not fit and proper. That allows local authorities to enter into dialogue with local private sector landlords to ensure that correct standards are maintained, and to raise standards in some cases.

I hope that local authorities will take the new power seriously and use it where necessary. I have visited some local authorities that respond proactively to the local private sector by holding meetings to ensure that standards are correct. My right hon. Friend the Minister for Local Government and Housing recently published a consultation document on the regulation of houses in multiple occupation. My hon. Friend is on to something, and we are aware of the improvements that need to be made.

Mr. John Wilkinson (Ruislip–Northwood): When the hon. Lady says that her hon. Friend is on to something, it is the understatement of the year. Is he not on to one of the biggest frauds and rackets in the administration of public money? How can the public have confidence that action

will be taken? The previous Secretary of State, the right hon. Member for Camberwell and Peckham (Ms Harman), said in the House that the Government

"will bring forward proposals . . . shortly"—[*Official Report*, 19 March 1998; Vol. 308, c. 1436.],

yet we will not necessarily get a Green Paper until the end of this year.

Ought not the Government to name and shame those local authorities in which there is maladministration of the system? The Audit Commission found clear evidence of fraud on the part of either elected representatives or officers in a quarter of the local authorities that it visited. That is a national disgrace.

Angela Eagle: I welcome the hon. Gentleman's realisation that the housing benefit system, which was created by the previous Conservative Administration, is in need of much improvement. I also note, although it was not quite an apology, his indirect admission that in creating housing benefit and ensuring that its administration was fragmented to 409 different local authorities, particular difficulties of administration were created. Some local authorities administer the housing benefit system superbly and some do it very badly indeed.

One question that we are considering is how we can raise the standard of the worst to the best. We have already done a lot with respect to fraud. We have set up a simplification and improvement project, which has reported to the Prime Minister, to find out how we can make a complex system easier to understand and administer. We will continue our drive to improve standards in that area.

Mr. Peter L. Pike (Burnley): As my hon. Friend the Member for Sunderland, South (Mr. Mullin) said, the biggest ripper-off of public funds is the landlord who buys a cheap terraced property in a constituency such as mine for £5,000 and can pay for it with housing benefit within 18 months. That is an abuse of public money and it needs clamping down on and stopping.

Angela Eagle: It is that sort of matter that the review of housing policy and benefit will be considering. We will be publishing a Green Paper later in the year. We are as aware as anyone of some of the bad administration and the rip-offs that occur as a result of the system that we inherited. However, I caution hon. Members that we are talking about the roof over people's heads, so we have to be careful how we change a system on which many millions of people rely. We will do it, and there will be a lot of consultation around the Green Paper. We are serious about reform, but we must not underestimate the complexity or the seriousness of the issues that face us as we approach the publication of the Green Paper on housing policy later this year.

Benefits Fraud

12. **Mr. Eric Forth** (Bromley and Chislehurst): If he will make a statement on his policy for the detection of organised benefit fraud. [84002]

The Minister of State, Department of Social Security (Mr. Stephen Timms): We have a national team of highly trained investigators in the Benefits Agency security investigation service, which exists to counter the threat of organised fraud. I visited its office in Manchester recently and was impressed with what I saw. Last year, just over 650 cases were accepted for prosecution as a result of the service's work. In addition, we have commissioned an independent review of the Government's approach to tackling organised fraud in social security, which will report in the autumn.

Mr. Forth: Why is the London organised fraud investigation team being wound up?

Mr. Timms: Because of serious concerns about the way in which it operated. We are learning the lessons from that experience. That is why, in February, I asked John Scampion, the commissioner of the social fund, to carry out a review of our approach to organised fraud. He is extremely well placed to carry out the work owing to his familiarity with the benefits system—he was the local authority chief executive at Solihull for 18 years.

This is an area in which we in the Department need to work together with local authorities. Of course, the problem also affects the private sector. Last week, I joined the Association of British Insurers for the launch of its fraud web site, which has a link to the DSS fraud web pages, which gave me a chance once again to promote the need for all of us who are affected by fraud to co-operate in tackling it.

Mr. Frank Field (Birkenhead): As the Government have promised an announcement later today on the benefit card, and as one of the reasons for it was that it should act as an effective measure against fraud, does my hon. Friend have to hand the figures for the savings that taxpayers would have made had ICL delivered it on time? If not, can he make them available in the Library before the end of the day?

Mr. Timms: I do not have the figures to hand. If they are available, I shall ensure that they are placed in the Library.

Mr. Desmond Swayne (New Forest, West): Does the Minister understand that virtual reality is no answer to the staggering amount of fraud in the system? Why are the Government reducing investigation and the emphasis on detection? Does he believe that detection and prevention are incompatible?

Mr. Timms: No; that is nonsense. We are not reducing the effort at all. We are making sure that there is proper attention to prevention, and not just detection. That is the basis of the strategy that we published in March. We are measuring the amount of fraud in the system systematically for the first time, and we will reduce it. Through such measurements, we will be able to demonstrate that we are reducing it, as the hon. Gentleman will see.

Minimum Pension Guarantee

13. **Mr. Jeremy Corbyn** (Islington, North): What estimate he has made of the cost of linking the minimum income guarantee for pensions to average earnings. [84003]

The Secretary of State for Social Security (Mr. Alistair Darling): We intend to raise the minimum income guarantee for pensioners in line with earnings as resources allow, so that even the least well-off among today's pensioners can share in rising prosperity. We have pledged to raise it in line with earnings next April and estimate that that will cost an additional £220 million.

Mr. Corbyn: As the Secretary of State accepts the need to raise the minimum income guarantee in line with earnings, does he not accept that the basic state pension should also be raised in line with earnings, instead of being raised only in line with prices, which means that pensioners are significantly worse off than they were when the Tories broke the link? Should not the Government at least redress that imbalance?

Mr. Darling: No, I do not agree with my hon. Friend, because that would not help the poorest pensioners. I have made it clear in the House before that the Government's priority is to address a major problem that we faced on coming into office: the fact that many pensioners live on very low incomes. That is why we are investing more than £4 billion over this Parliament. The new minimum income guarantee for pensioners targets help on the poorest pensioners. We have increased the winter fuel allowance fivefold, to £100, for every pensioner household, starting this winter. We have also reformed pensions in the long term, particularly through the new state second pension, which will greatly increase the pension that low earners can accrue during their lifetimes.

The Government's strategy is to do far more than ever before to help pensioners who have lost out because of the policies of the previous Government. My hon. Friend's proposal would benefit middle and some higher income pensioners, but poorer pensioners would not benefit at all, which we want to avoid. I believe that the Government's strategy is right because it does more to help the pensioners who need help most.

Mr. Peter Viggers (Gosport): Why do Ministers continue to say, more in hope than belief, that there is no disincentive to save? I am sure that the Secretary of State saw the reply to the parliamentary question that I tabled earlier this month showing that a single pensioner receives £60 a week more if he has done nothing to save for his retirement than someone who has savings of more than £16,000. The accumulated facts show that it would cost £43,000 to buy an annuity with that return. *[Interruption.]* Those facts were revealed in an answer given by the Minister of State, who is even now briefing the Secretary of State. Does not that mean that people must save £43,000 or not bother at all? Is not that the most massive disincentive to saving?

Mr. Darling: No. The hypothesis behind the hon. Gentleman's question is unrealistic. Pensioners in the position that he described would have a SERPS entitlement that he seems to have ignored. Let me deal with the minimum income guarantee, which is what he is complaining about. As I understand it, in so far as the Conservatives have a policy on welfare, they are against the minimum income guarantee. That would mean that 1.5 million pensioners would lose out immediately.

The Government's clear priority is to help the poorest pensioners. If the hon. Gentleman does not accept that, he must accept that the logic of what he says is to remove the support that we give them so that they would be poorer still. Most people would think it right to help pensioners who, often through no fault of their own, are on very low incomes. That is why we increased the minimum income guarantee, which will mean that some pensioners will gain £160 in real terms—something that the Tory party would have denied them.

The Tory party has to come clean with people; if Tory Members are against the minimum income guarantee, they must be in favour of reducing the income and the living standards of 1.5 million pensioners.

Maternity Costs

14. **Siobhain McDonagh** (Mitcham and Morden): What plans he has to assist mothers with the costs of maternity. [84004]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Social Security (Mr. Hugh Bayley): We are extending maternity allowance to women who earn £30 a week or more and increasing it for self-employed women, who currently receive less benefit than employed women. The existing social fund maternity payment will be replaced with a sure start maternity grant from April 2000, and doubled from £100 to £200 for each child.

Those improvements will give low-earning mothers-to-be some financial help towards the costs of a new baby, enable them to take their full entitlement to maternity leave and help them to achieve a better balance between work and family life. It will be good for their standard of living, good for their health and good for the health of their babies.

Siobhain McDonagh: Is my hon. Friend aware of how widely welcomed the extension of maternity allowance to less well paid women and the new maternity grant have been? Does he agree that that will allow less well-off mothers to stay in touch with the workplace? Will he assure the House that his Department will do everything that it can to be involved in the Government-wide plans for family-friendly policies in the workplace?

Mr. Bayley: I thank my hon. Friend for raising those issues. This package of policies demonstrates joined-up Government at its best. People widely welcome the doubling of maternity payment from £100 to £200. People should also be aware that the person claiming has to be in touch with health professionals, so that individuals can obtain advice on how to bring up their new child. Those improvements are welcomed throughout the country and throughout the House by everyone apart from Conservative Members who, last week, voted against the extension of maternity allowance.

Benefits Fraud

15. **Mr. Derek Twigg** (Halton): What plans he has to minimise fraud in the administration of housing benefit. [84005]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Social Security (Angela Eagle): "Safeguarding Social Security", published in March, makes it clear that we are developing a benefit system that is secure from start to

finish. We have already taken a number of steps to make the administration of housing benefit more secure. Those steps include providing £100 million to fund a rigorous programme of checks by local authorities on the authenticity of claims. We have also introduced a scheme, in conjunction with the Royal Mail, to prevent fraudsters from redirecting postal payments.

Mr. Twigg: I thank my hon. Friend for that answer. The previous Government did nothing about benefit fraud. Is not the level of fraud that we inherited from that Government unacceptable? Will my hon. Friend do all that she can to work with local authorities to ensure best practice; and, more important, will she ensure that that best practice is spread throughout local government?

Angela Eagle: My hon. Friend makes a perfectly valid point. Some local authorities are extremely good at administering housing benefit, while others fail and fall below the kind of standard that we would expect. My right hon. Friend the Minister for Local Government and Housing is introducing best value pilots, which will include housing benefit and will set—[HON. MEMBERS: "Ah."] Conservative Members seem to think that sitting there and sneering about the Government's plans is somehow—*[Interruption.]*

Madam Speaker: Order. Members on the Opposition Front Bench must remain silent while the answer is being given. I want no running commentaries from them—or from Members on the Benches behind them, for that matter.

Angela Eagle: Thank you, Madam Speaker. The hooligan element has taken over the Tory party; all Tory Members can do is sneer—they have no policies.

As I was saying before I was so rudely interrupted, the best value pilots will set benchmarks of good administration for housing benefit that can be followed by other local authorities. We have also included housing benefit and council tax benefit in the new work-focused single gateway pilots. We have been carrying out some prototypes between local authorities and the Benefits Agency to improve administration. Those prototypes have resulted in spectacular improvements, so we are considering how we can spread that throughout the whole country.

Sir Sydney Chapman (Chipping Barnet): Further to the point made earlier by my hon. Friend the Member for Ruislip–Northwood (Mr. Wilkinson), will the Minister confirm that a recent Audit Commission report shows that, in no fewer than 25 per cent. of local authorities visited, the commission found evidence of fraud committed by officers or members of the local authority? Does she agree that that disgraceful situation should be addressed urgently, ahead of other reforms to the housing benefit system?

Angela Eagle: If the hon. Gentleman had read the rest of the reports, he would realise that they both compliment the Government on the progress made in detecting and reducing fraud. I agree that such an incidence of officer or councillor fraud is utterly unacceptable, and we are producing a whole strategy to deal with it. Perhaps he should sit back and reflect on how he went through the Lobby and helped the Tory Government to create a housing benefit system that is so fragmented and fractured that it is extremely difficult to administer efficiently.

Freedom of Information Draft Bill

3.31 pm

The Secretary of State for the Home Department (Mr. Jack Straw): With permission, Madam Speaker, I should like to make a statement about freedom of information, on which I have today published a draft Bill and consultation paper. Copies are available in the Vote Office.

In December 1997, the Government published a White Paper entitled "Your Right to Know". I pay tribute to my right hon. Friend the Member for South Shields (Dr. Clark) for his work on that document, which underpins the draft Bill. I am also very grateful to the Select Committee on Public Administration for its consideration of the White Paper's proposals.

In drafting the Bill, we had to strike a careful balance three ways, between extending the public's access to information, protecting citizens' own privacy, and preserving confidentiality where disclosure itself would be against the public interest. That has been a difficult balancing act, but I think that we have got it right. The scales are weighted decisively in favour of openness, and the proposals will radically change the relationship between Government and citizens.

The proposals are not merely about abstract rights, to the benefit of academics, historians or constitutional theorists alone, important though all those are. The proposals will benefit everyone and provide access to the sort of information that people really want to know: parents will be better able to find out how schools apply their admissions policies; patients will be able to understand how hospitals allocate resources between different treatments and how they prioritise waiting lists; and citizens will be able to find out more about the actions of their local police force.

Under the Bill, for the first time, everyone will have the right of access to information held by bodies across the public sector. There will be a duty on public authorities to adopt a scheme for the publication of information about their work; a positive duty on authorities, even where they are not obliged to provide such information, to consider disclosure on public interest grounds; and a new Information Commissioner, together with a new information tribunal, to enforce the rights which are created.

Let me now explain to the House how the draft Bill compares with the White Paper's proposals. On which bodies are to be covered, the Bill's proposals are a little wider than those of the White Paper. All the functions of the police and police authorities are to be covered as the Select Committee proposed, with specific exemptions for information which is gained as part of an investigation or which relates to informers. The security and intelligence agencies, now together with the National Criminal Intelligence Service, will remain outside the scope of the Bill. We are discussing how Parliament can be included without prejudicing parliamentary privilege.

Unlike the current code, the White Paper promised access to specific documents and actual records—the Bill delivers that promise. Applicants for information may express a preference for the means of communication of the record: inspection of originals, a copy, or a summary of the information that is sought.

The White Paper set out seven areas to be covered by exemptions, together with other information that would be excluded from the Bill. It also set out conditions on the right of access. The Bill delivers broadly the same exemptions as the White Paper, but the tests involved do differ.

As to policy advice, there was never any expectation that Cabinet documents, inter-ministerial correspondence and official papers on developing policy would ever be disclosed under a freedom of information regime. As the White Paper said:

> "Now more than ever the Government needs space and time in which to assess arguments and conduct its own debates with a degree of privacy."

Moreover, it is worth bearing in mind the fact that the product of such private deliberations is almost always a public announcement of policy.

Under the Bill, there will be a class exemption for the formulation of Government policy in place of the simple harm test in the White Paper, which we believe will achieve the same purpose in a more straightforward way. The White Paper proposed a substantial harm test to cover six specified interests in addition to policy advice, which was to be covered by a simple harm test. After careful consideration, we reached the view that a single omnibus substantial harm test could not work properly for the range of exemptions proposed. What is or may be "substantial" in relation to law enforcement may not be so in relation to international relations. We believe that the harm concerned must be capable of being interpreted in relation to the subject matter that it is designed to cover.

Therefore, where national security is an issue, the test now proposed is whether the exemption is required for the purpose of safeguarding it. Where the health and safety of an individual is at issue, the test now proposed is whether disclosure would or would be likely to endanger the physical or mental health or safety of an individual. Elsewhere the proposed test is whether disclosure would or would be likely to prejudice the criteria set out in the relevant exemption.

These tests will result in a more open regime than under the existing non-statutory code of practice. Under the code, the test is the possibility of harm being caused. Under the draft Bill, the test is a higher one of probability. Generally, the Information Commissioner will have the power to substitute his or her judgment as to disclosure for that of the public authority. He or she will be able to ensure that public authorities are not able to claim that prejudice would be caused in circumstances where this would be trivial or frivolous. The prejudice has to be real, actual or of "substance". In respect of policy advice, the commissioner will be able to challenge the reasonableness of a Minister's decision against disclosure.

There are two areas where the White Paper suggested that a harm test would apply where in fact such a test turns out to be impractical: these are personal information and information supplied in confidence. First, the disclosure of personal information is governed by our obligations to comply with the European Community data protection directive and the European convention on human rights. The convention and directive do not provide for the application of a harm test, and we cannot therefore unilaterally provide for one ourselves.

Secondly, we believe it would be wrong to overturn in the Bill duties of confidence that arise at common law. Those doing business with public authorities have the

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right to ensure that their confidences are respected. In many cases, public authorities need access to information held by others, which they in turn will be prepared to release only if given an undertaking of confidentiality. Where information is supplied to a public authority in those circumstances, the public authority should not be required to disclose it if that would constitute a breach of confidence actionable by the supplier of the information.

Let me turn now to the enforcement provisions for the new regime. An Information Commissioner will enforce the regime, and there will be rights of appeal against decisions of the commissioner to a tribunal, with a further appeal, on a point of law, to the courts.

The Select Committee on Public Administration said in its report that there was a need for coherence between the data protection regime and the freedom of information regime, with a "simple and comprehensive" right of access to each. We agree. Many requests for information will be for a mixture of personal and general information. We shall therefore merge the office of the Data Protection Commissioner with that of the Information Commissioner.

The cost of all the proposals when fully implemented is forecast to be between £90 million and £125 million a year. A task force to assist implementation, under the chairmanship of my right hon. Friend Lord Williams of Mostyn, has been established. The Bill is compatible with the requirements of the European convention on human rights.

The Bill will now be subject to extensive consultation with the public and Parliament, including the Select Committee on Public Administration.

I have spoken today of the need to balance rights. There is a right to know, a right to privacy and a right to confidentiality. For too long, we have given insufficient weight to the right to know. The proposals in the draft Bill seek to redress that balance.

This Government have done more than any other to open their workings to greater scrutiny by the public. In our manifesto, we promised a programme of constitutional reform to get citizens more closely involved in the decisions that affect their everyday lives. We have delivered, as promised, a Scottish Parliament and a Welsh Assembly. We are bringing rights home through the Human Rights Act 1998, and today we are taking forward our pledge on freedom of information.

I commend these radical and balanced proposals to the House.

Sir Norman Fowler (Sutton Coldfield): Before responding, I must declare an interest as a journalist and chairman of a regional newspaper company. I hope that, on this occasion, the Home Secretary has heard that declaration.

We welcome the fact that the Home Secretary has chosen, on this occasion, to make a statement on the Floor of the House. I hope, however, that he is aware that, after the past two years, many Members of the House, not all of them Conservatives, will need persuading that the Government have their heart in freedom of information.

Mr. Ronnie Campbell (Blyth Valley) *rose—*

Sir Norman Fowler: I do not think that I should take an intervention at this point.

The one action by the Home Secretary that we remember above all others was his obtainment, earlier this year, of an injunction against the whole of the British media to prevent publication of a few paragraphs of the Macpherson report, which was, in any event, to be published a few days later. Will he explain to the House how he squares that with all his words about freedom of information?

Our concern is increased not only by the fact that the clause that sets out the exemptions to freedom of information is the longest in the draft Bill and that the exemptions go way beyond national security, but by the fact that, in one vital respect, the test for withholding information has unquestionably been made easier. The White Paper proposed the test based on the question

"will the disclosure of the information cause substantial harm?"

The Home Secretary is now proposing a test based on the question whether disclosure would or would be likely to prejudice matters set out in the exemption in question.

Does not that mark a retreat from the White Paper and a reduction of the test in the previous Government's code of conduct, and was it not argued against inside Government by several Ministers, including the Lord Chancellor? In the lengthy negotiations in Whitehall, have not the Government Departments and the civil service won the battle in what they regard as a damage limitation exercise?

I have some questions about specific details of the statement. Is the Home Secretary saying that none of the submissions that come to Ministers will be available for publication, even though many of them are factual statements of the position in a particular policy area? Has he rejected any substantial change to the 30-year rule, given that it has clearly broken down in many respects? Will he say more about the costs of the new system? He said in his statement that they would be between £90 million and £125 million. Will the Government reimburse bodies such as the police, or will costs go where they fall?

Above all, will the Home Secretary confirm that the Government could and should become more open without any legislation? I remind him of the way in which he personally blocked all questions about the leak inquiry concerning the Macpherson report. Does he remember that, on 4 March, I asked him not for the identity of those who were to be interviewed, but whether Ministers, officials and special advisers would be interviewed? His written reply stated:

"It would not be in the interests of the leak investigation now under way to give these details."—[*Official Report*, 4 March 1999; Vol. 326, c. *855*.]

That does not sound like a Minister who is committed to freedom of information.

How will the Bill affect the Government's refusal to disclose the fact that a European Union Committee is considering nearly 200 taxes—twice the number previously thought—for tax harmonisation? Is it not strange that the Dutch Finance Ministry confirmed that freely over the weekend, while the Treasury yesterday told the press that it was "confidential"?

Our aim will be to make this legislation effective, but if the Government want more openness in public bodies, they must take the lead and set an example. So far, there is precious little evidence of that.

Mr. Straw: I shall deal first with the right hon. Gentleman's specific points, and then with the general one. He asserts that the proposals will result in a reduction of the test in the previous Government's code of conduct.

Sir Norman Fowler: And the White Paper.

Mr. Straw: As I explained in my statement, that assertion is incorrect because the Bill will result in a strengthening of the test in the previous Government's code of conduct. Their harm test was simply one of a possibility of harm, but this is of a probability of harm. Yes, the tests differ from those proposed in the White Paper; there is no dubiety about that. I have explained the reasons. On further examination, we found that had we kept to the substantial harm test, information which, unquestionably, could have caused harm to, for example, the national interest in respect of national security or to a law enforcement investigation, but would not have fallen into the category of substantial harm, could have been disclosed. We think that that would itself have been harmful. For that reason, we have gone for more straightforward, simple harm tests.

As I said, the harm tests that we have proposed must ensure—and will be required to ensure—that the harm concerned is real, actual or of substance. We are not talking about an assertion by Ministers, or anybody else, that something could cause a trivial or minor degree of harm; it must be of substance.

The right hon. Gentleman asked whether, under clause 27, none of the submissions that go to Ministers would be disclosable, including factual statements. Factual statement background information is potentially disclosable; it depends which part of the Bill it falls under. Importantly, every Department will have to establish a code of practice for the publication of information. In my view, Departments should be separating argumentative policy advice documents from those which provide background information, and ensuring that background information is disclosable. Moreover, one of the big differences between this Bill and the code which preceded it is that the proposals will be enshrined in legislation and will secure a major change in culture.

The right hon. Gentleman asked what the Government did to become more open even before this Bill was published. Pages 1 and 2 of the consultative document set out a good deal of information about the sort of changes that have been made, where the Government have already introduced major improvements in openness.

Since I became Secretary of State, my Department has put its statisticians on a proper independent footing. No longer, as for my predecessor, is the date of publication of crime data in the gift of Ministers, who then manipulate it to suit their political purpose. We have published all operational manuals relating to the immigration and nationality directorate, except those relating to law enforcement.

When I came to office, more than a dozen reports of Her Majesty's inspectorate of prisons were sitting on the Secretary of State's desk—some more than a year old—waiting for him to approve publication. I have established a clear protocol so that those documents must be published, whether I like it or not, within six weeks. Many of my colleagues throughout Whitehall have similarly ensured that there is much more openness than there ever was under the last Administration.

We are all delighted to learn from the right hon. Gentleman that his aim is, on behalf of the Opposition, to make the legislation effective. There is always room for a Pauline conversion. As some of us remember, in the Conservative campaign guide the whole Tory party stated that there was

"no need for a Freedom of Information Act"

and that

"the only group in Britain who are seriously interested in a Freedom of Information Act are inquisitive left-wing busy bodies."

In our judgment, all British citizens are interested in a Freedom of Information Act, and we are delivering it.

Dr. David Clark (South Shields): I thank my right hon. Friend for his statement, and congratulate him sincerely on his draft Bill. It marks a new stage in the struggle to sweep away the cloak of secrecy that has engulfed British society for too long, and means that for the first time our citizens will have a statutory right to information. I also thank my right hon. Friend for the manner in which he is taking the Bill forward, and for allowing wide discussions both inside and outside the House.

The Bill is in some respects slightly different from the White Paper, as I would expect, but I have no difficulty in going along with most aspects of it. I would, however, like elucidation of one issue: that of prejudice and substantial harm. My right hon. Friend said that prejudice would have to be of substance. Can we not write that into the Bill? It would be very reassuring.

Mr. Straw: I, in turn, thank my right hon. Friend for his generous comments.

My right hon. Friend is correct in saying that the Bill will, above all, change the culture in which Governments operate. This is the first time that any citizen in this country will have a right to information from Government, and Government will have to say why information should not be provided rather than citizens' having to say why it should be provided. That is a profound change from the climate that we found when we came to office.

As for my right hon. Friend's substantive point—or, rather, the point on which he differs with me—he asked whether the Bill could state that prejudice must be actual, real or of substance. I will certainly consider that, but, as my right hon. Friend knows, following the Pepper *v.* Hart judgment by the Appellate Committee of the House of Lords, if an issue relating to the interpretation of the Bill and of prejudice comes to court, their lordships in the Appellate Committee take account of what Ministers have said in explanation. I am sure that any court will take account of the definition that I have used—

"real, actual or of substance"—

whether or not it is possible to write it into the Bill. That is one of the reasons why I have put it on the record.

Mr. A. J. Beith (Berwick-upon-Tweed): Putting the Bill on the statute book, even in its present form, would

[Mr. A. J. Beith]

constitute a significant advance in the right of the citizen to have information; but do we not have the impression that while it has been hidden away in the Home Office, the mice have got at it?

Will the consultation be real, and will it make it possible for some key points to be reinstated in the Bill? Does the Home Secretary recognise the feeling that—as the right hon. Member for South Shields (Dr. Clark) suggested—prejudice should be defined in some way as substantial, serious or significant, and that there should be a right of access to factual information on policy issues that might otherwise be excluded because it is in the category of advice to Ministers? Issues such as BSE and Gulf war syndrome come to mind as examples in regard to which important facts must be included in the advice to Ministers. Should not threats to the environment and the need to prevent corruption be among the grounds on which otherwise protected information can be forced into the open, in the public interest?

Mr. Straw: I first thank the right hon. Gentleman for his broad welcome for the Bill. Obviously, I understand that he may have some reservations, but it is a significant advance. I promise that, in all the very long and open consideration within Government on the Bill, I never spotted a mouse even in the Home Office, and despite the fact that there is poison against rodents in my room just around the corner from this place.

Mr. Patrick McLoughlin (West Derbyshire): Is the poison for the rebels?

Mr. Straw: It was not laid by the Patronage Secretary.

On background papers, the right hon. Gentleman asked how much we can change. It is important that, so far as possible, background papers that inform policy considerations, but do not determine them, and whose publication would not prejudice the good workings of government, should be published. That is one of the things that we need to look at very carefully. By the way, we intend to publish the background papers leading to the publication of the Freedom of Information Bill as proof of our good faith.

I say again that there are two safeguards in relation to the publication of such papers. One is that each Government Department has to publish its own programme of publication. The second is that, under clause 14, even where it is held by the Government Department and by the commissioner that the Department is entitled to refuse, as a right, to publish the information, it will still have a duty to consider exercising a discretion in the public interest for publishing that information.

We have looked at the use of the word "prejudice" a good deal. One of the reasons that it was chosen by parliamentary counsel was that it is in greater use than the word "harm". The House will be fully familiar with the fact that it crops up in paragraph (4) of part II of schedule 12A of the Local Government Act 1972. The point about that—it is, of course, an Act that was passed under a previous Administration—is that it talks about information whose publication would prejudice the authority.

The use of the word "prejudice" crops up again in the Contempt of Court Act 1981. More important, it has been the subject of much judicial definition under the European convention on human rights, so its use is appropriate. Of course, that could be the subject of more consideration.

As for threats to the environment, again, the provisions of the Bill say that environmental information has to be published, save where it would endanger the health or safety of an individual. That is a pretty high test to pass. We certainly believe that the maximum amount of information relating to the environment should be published. Again, the degree to which the Bill achieves that end will, I hope, be the subject of consideration, not least by the Select Committee on Public Administration.

Mr. Chris Mullin (Sunderland, South): I welcome my right hon. Friend's statement. I share the view that the measure will be a significant advance over what has gone before, but he will realise that there is a certain amount of disappointment among some of those who have taken a close interest in the matter. He will have seen it alleged—it is not a view I hold—that the Bill will not make a significant difference to existing practice. Will he please address that point?

Does my right hon. Friend agree that the powers and, indeed, identity of the commissioner will be crucial to the way in which the Bill is enforced? If, for example, the commissioner turned out to be a retired Cabinet Secretary, we might all have grounds for suspicion that it might not be enforced with quite the rigour that we would like, so can we have an assurance that the selection process for the commissioner will be open?

Will my right hon. Friend say something about the powers that the commissioner will have? In the event of a dispute between a Minister and the commissioner, who will have the final say?

Mr. Straw: I am grateful for my hon. Friend's commendation. The Bill is a significant advance. Of course, I have seen the allegations that it will not make much difference. They will turn out to be untrue. Once the Bill has been passed—as I hope it will be, no doubt with the support of the Opposition—into law and been implemented, there will be a profound change in what people see as their rights in relation to those of Government.

Taken with the Human Rights Act 1998 and the Data Protection Act 1998, we are changing profoundly the balance of the relationship between the citizen and the state.

We certainly did not have it in mind that a retired Cabinet Secretary might be able to be appointed to the position of commissioner. I should say—if I may give vent to a private idea—that I had it more in mind that the position might be a good place for a retired Home Secretary, or that some consideration should be given to how we may create a selection process to achieve that end. I should also say, for the benefit of the record, that that was said in jest—although I am always a candidate for a write-in vote.

The commissioner's powers will be very extensive indeed. In most of the exemptions in part II of the Bill, the commissioner will have the power to substitute his or her decision for that of the public authority. Therefore, if the public authority says, "No, don't publish", but the

commissioner says, "Yes, do publish", the commissioner's decision—subject only to an appeal to a tribunal and, ultimately, to the courts—will apply.

Policy advice, because of the certification procedure, will be dealt with at one remove. However, under the current clause 28, if the commissioner says that, in his or her view, a document that has been categorised as policy advice is one that no reasonable Minister could possibly have categorised as policy advice, the document would be published.

I accept that the position of commissioner will be a very important appointment, and that the selection procedures will have to reflect that fact.

Mr. Peter Brooke (Cities of London and Westminster): Given our long national tradition of openness in local government, from how many advisers will the Mayor of London be able to accept confidential advice?

Mr. Straw: I am not sure of the precise answer to the right hon. Gentleman's question, although I can say that local government has been significantly ahead of national Government on the matter of openness. He may have been raising an issue about relations between central and local government. One of our proposals is that the Department that possesses information originally will have control over which freedom of information regime should apply to it.

Mr. Gerald Kaufman (Manchester, Gorton): Does my right hon. Friend agree that the response to his statement today by Opposition Front Benchers was absolutely mind-blowing for those of us who spent 18 years trying to get a Freedom of Information Bill passed, but watched the Tories vote down any attempts to pass such a Bill? As long ago as the 1983 Parliament, as shadow Home Secretary, I made the passage of one such Bill the official policy of the Labour party.

In considering changes to the legislation between now and the introduction of the full Bill, will my right hon. Friend take account of the fact that although parliamentary counsel are excellent advisers on words, they are not necessarily the best advisers on policy? Will he remember that fact when considering the wording of the final Bill?

Does my right hon. Friend agree that the presumption in the legislation must be that information will be disclosed, rather than withheld; that risks shall be taken on disclosure, rather than on concealment; and that any changes between the draft Bill and the full Bill shall be made to widen the window of information, and to get rid entirely of the net curtain mentality that prevailed under the Tory Government?

Mr. Straw: I do indeed remember my right hon. Friend's pioneering contribution to freedom of information legislation and his action in 1983, when he was shadow Home Secretary, to make that the then Opposition's official policy. I share his view on the Conservative Opposition's rather rapid conversion on the issue. Although they do not have a monopoly when it comes to conversions, their conversion on this occasion is bigger than others that I could think of.

I accept what my right hon. Friend says about parliamentary counsel, who, in my long experience, are brilliant, but they do not presume to make policy decisions, which are a matter for Ministers.

I fully understand that my right hon. Friend has not had time to see the consultative document, but clause 8 lays down the fundamental right that every citizen will have. It starts:

"Any person is entitled, on making to a public authority a request for information—

(a) to be informed by the public authority whether it holds information of the description specified in the request, and

(b) if that is the case, to have that information communicated to him."

That clause is fundamental to the Bill. It sets up the presumption of a right to information. Everything else is merely an exception and does not detract from the fundamental nature of that right.

Mr. Richard Shepherd (Aldridge–Brownhills): That statement would have been truer of the White Paper than it is of what we have seen of the draft Bill. I welcome the fact that this is a draft Bill that can be considered by the House at greater leisure and in detail. However, it represents a significant retreat from the White Paper. In some respects, although it is broader, it is weaker than the code of practice. It removes the code's more enforceable—in the sense of discretion—public interest test, making it easier to conceal misconduct. It exempts all information about the formulation and development of Government policy, including factual information and scientific analysis on issues such as bovine spongiform encephalopathy and genetically modified food in clause 28(1)(a). It replaces the White Paper's substantial harm test with a lower prejudice test. It contains wide catch-all exemptions, allowing authorities to refuse disclosure without having to show that it would cause harm. It allows new exemptions to be created at short notice to block requests already received.

Those are just a few of the points that show that the draft Bill is a significant and substantial retreat from the Prime Minister's assurance in the White Paper about the partnership between the citizen and the state. It reverses the White Paper's presumption that the information is the citizen's and gives central Government large discretion over the release of information.

Mr. Straw: The hon. Gentleman has taken an active interest in the subject, not least as a member of the Select Committee on Public Administration, so I am sorry to say that I do not agree with him. I do not believe that anyone reading the Bill would come to his conclusions. There has been no dubiety; I have not disguised from the House for a second that we have differed from the White Paper's six areas in which the substantial harm test was to be established. This has been a consultative process in which we have had second and third thoughts. We have changed the effect, though not the method, of the clauses relating to policy advice, principally clause 28. However, in no sense could that be described as a significant retreat from the White Paper.

With respect, the hon. Gentleman is wrong to say that we are reversing the presumption. I ask him to look at clause 8, which establishes for the first time the clear right of every citizen to seek information from Departments and other public authorities. The authority must argue the case for an exemption.

[Mr. Straw]

We are publishing a large amount of information about BSE—a process that may have begun under the previous Government. *[Interruption.]* It may be discretionary. The House may have to consider that matter, not least in the Public Administration Committee. I have no interest in factual information being the subject of exclusion or exemption. However, there is an important point about policy advice. I have read and re-read the Select Committee's report carefully. It never argued that the process of policy development and formulation should take place in an environment in which people were not able to have disagreements in private. Policy formulation in government, in opposition or in the editorial conferences of newspapers cannot take place properly unless people have confidence that what they say in a meeting will not be broadcast publicly. Institutions cannot operate if they are not allowed some privacy in policy formulation.

Some countries with freedom of information regimes have not given proper protection to policy formulation and advice. The paradox of their situation is that, far from that leading to an increase in the accountability of Ministers and decision makers, it has reduced accountability because it has cut the audit trail. Officials and Ministers have gone in for Post-it notes and oral decisions which should have been properly recorded, or for devices for ordaining all sorts of documents which have nothing to do with the Cabinet or Cabinet Committees as Cabinet documents. We want a straightforward and honest regime which recognises that we are dealing with three competing rights—the right to know, the right to privacy and the right to confidentiality. Getting the balance right is difficult, but I think we have achieved it.

Mrs. Gwyneth Dunwoody (Crewe and Nantwich): Is my right hon. Friend aware that the best test of the legislation will be the first occasion when the Government give factual information to the House of Commons that is rather uncomfortable for them—something that may arrive sooner than they expect? Is it the intention to include detailed papers about information on European matters which will be of grave concern? He will be aware that the House of Commons needs to take back to itself the right of access to information, and that it is because of the 20 years of refusal to give such facts and figures to the House that the Bill is desperately needed.

May I comfort my right hon. Friend with one thought? He should not worry too much about those argumentative papers which he says are essential—those will be the ones that get into the public domain without any assistance from him or anyone else.

Mr. Straw: I can reassure my hon. Friend that my ministerial colleagues and I publish factual information that is uncomfortable to us every day of the week. It is right that we should do so, because the public have a right to know what is going on in our area of the woods. The statistical services of the Home Office have been put on a properly independent basis, and it is now the director of the research, development and statistics directorate, and not Ministers, who publishes those statistical data—whether they are uncomfortable or not—and sets the date for publication.

On European Union matters, I agree that much more should be subject to parliamentary scrutiny. In terms of justice and home affairs, we have sought, with the co-operation of the relevant Select Committees of this House and the other place, to improve the flow of information that is made available to the House in advance, for example, of Justice and Home Affairs Councils. We are always open to suggestion on ways of improving the flow of information.

Mr. Gerald Howarth (Aldershot): Many people will think that the Home Secretary has made a good case against his own Bill. Given the huge raft of exemptions for which he has provided, can he give some practical examples of information that he expects the Bill to produce which the Government are not prepared to produce at the moment? Does he agree that, under the new proposals, he would have been prevented from seeking an injunction against *The Sunday Telegraph* when it tried, rightly, to place in the public domain information to which the public should have been entitled?

Mr. Straw: I find the hon. Gentleman's point about the injunction, and that of his right hon. Friend the Member for Sutton Coldfield (Sir N. Fowler), to be eccentric. With the full support of the courts, I was seeking to protect the privilege of this House to see the document first, as well as the commission and the Lawrence family. No one could argue that I was seeking to suppress publication, as there was no doubt that the document would be published three days later, in any event.

The hon. Gentleman asked what would happen under the Bill that is not happening now. I gave a series of practical examples in my statement, and I am sorry that he was not paying his usual attention to what I said. The examples included information on waiting lists and the allocation of resources by health authorities; information on school admissions policies; important information on the police service, which should be made available unless it interferes with the investigation or prevention of crime; and information on many aspects of central Government.

I am delighted that the hon. Gentleman recognises that we have been very open. Often, when I am asked a parliamentary question, it is suggested that I do not give information, but I say that we ought to provide it. I and my ministerial colleagues have sought to ensure that we provide much more information than the previous Government did or than we are required to provide.

Mr. Rhodri Morgan (Cardiff, West): I, too, congratulate my right hon. Friend the Home Secretary on finally presenting the draft Bill to the House, after what seemed like an elephantine gestation period. I thank him for his kind words about the Select Committee on Public Administration, which it has been my privilege to chair, and its work on the draft Bill.

Are not the disappearance of the substantial harm test, the new override powers of the tribunal over the Committee's decisions and the almost unilateral nature of the public interest test, which is now in Ministers' hands, bound to lead to the suspicion that all the Sir Humphreys have drawn the covered wagons of Whitehall into a circle, to deny us information that, had we followed the White Paper principles, would have been put in the public domain if someone had requested it?

Mr. Straw: I thank my hon. Friend for what he said about the publication of the draft Bill. Our manifesto

commitment was to legislate in this Parliament, and we are only two years into it. We produced a White Paper in late 1997 that was considered by the Select Committee that he chaired, and we have now produced a draft Bill. We will legislate as soon as we can and I believe that we will end up well before the end of this Parliament with an Act on the statute book. That, I think, is significant progress.

I have sought to explain to the House why we decided, on careful examination, that it was not possible to use a single substantial harm test to cover all the disparate interests. Nor, in my judgment, was that desirable, because there could have been information whose publication would have caused real harm, but harm that could not quite be categorised as substantial, that would have had to be made available.

My hon. Friend spoke about the Sir Humphreys, but Ministers are responsible for what is in the draft Bill. We have taken advice, which has not been all one way, but we take full responsibility as Ministers. We are not hiding behind officials' skirts. Ministers have brought the proposals to Parliament, and it is for Parliament to decide how to dispose of them.

Mr. Eric Forth (Bromley and Chislehurst): Does the Home Secretary accept that in the brave new world that he is outlining, the taxpayer should and will learn a lot more about people whose pay and expenses are met through taxation? Should people who work in a Department on substantial salaries and who travel extensively be prepared to be open with the public about their activities? Will he give an undertaking that, before the legislation is enacted, he and his colleagues will tell us everything about what their political special advisers do in Departments, spending taxpayers' money?

Mr. Straw: I have answered many questions about the activities of my political advisers. It is usually pretty straightforward information. I am not sure whether it was the right hon. Gentleman or someone else who tabled a parliamentary question about the travel costs of my special advisers over the past two years, but I have answered the question and I shall continue to answer such questions.

Mr. Ronnie Campbell (Blyth Valley): I welcome the draft Bill. I remember that, many years ago, in the Public Administration Committee, when the Tories, to a man, wanted a code of practice on freedom of information, Labour Members, to a man, wanted a statutory right. The statutory right is the biggest improvement that the Government have made. The Committee will sit shortly, take evidence and make recommendations. Can I take it that those recommendations will be accepted?

Mr. Straw: The serious answer is that the usual dialectical process will take place—*[Interruption.]* Conservative Members do not know what that is. Thesis, antithesis and synthesis will take place. The Select Committee will make its proposals and we will read them carefully. I have not been able to accept every proposal made by the Select Committee in its previous report, but we have accepted several, including the criticisms that there was a disconnection between the data protection regime and the proposed regime for the Information Commissioner. We have sought to ensure that they will be properly connected.

Madam Speaker: Order. On that note, we will move on.

Points of Order

4.21 pm

Mr. Eric Forth (Bromley and Chislehurst): On a point of order, Madam Speaker. You were here earlier when we heard an almost unbelievable statement by a Minister. He told the House that a Secretary of State would make a statement about an important matter of public policy and a large sum of public money. You must have shared my astonishment when it was revealed that that statement would be made not here in the House, but in some other, as yet unspecified, location. Can you do anything to persuade or charm Ministers into coming to the House to make statements of huge public interest? That issue surely cannot be allowed to slide by without action being taken, preferably by yourself, but otherwise by anyone who can do so.

Mr. Quentin Davies (Grantham and Stamford): Further to that point of order, Madam Speaker.

Madam Speaker: Order. I think that I can competently deal with the matter. I was dismayed to hear the Secretary of State for Social Security tell the House that a statement would be made later today outside the House, presumably by the Department of Trade and Industry. I have no knowledge of what that statement contains, whether it is new policy, an extension of policy or a change of policy. If it is a new policy or a change of policy, it should be made at least by written answer in this House. The House deserves greater respect in such matters. I hope that those on the Treasury Bench will let the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry know my views on the matter. I might add, for some of those in the media who do not know the term "Treasury Bench", it means the Government Front Bench.

Mr. Andrew Mackinlay (Thurrock): On a point of order, Madam Speaker. When a complicated and important statement is being delivered, would it be within the rubric of the House for copies of the Minister's statement to be made available to Members in the Chamber? I have thought about that point for a long time. My right hon. Friend the Home Secretary took us through the complicated harm test rule, which I genuinely wanted to understand and would have asked about, had I caught your eye. I confess that I am still somewhat confused by, but very interested in, the issue. I notice that members of Press Gallery have the luxury, at the moment the Minister rises, of having the statement distributed to them, and some Front Benchers and other hon. Members close to those Front Benchers have access to statements. Would it be possible to explore whether statements could be made available to other hon. Members? If I were to rush out to get a copy—and this is the rub—I might offend you by being absent from the Chamber.

Madam Speaker: I understand the hon. Gentleman's feelings and I appreciate that they are echoed in many parts of the House. It is not a matter for me: it has always been for the Minister making a statement to determine when the documents will be made available. If the hon. Gentleman wishes to take the point up with the Modernisation Committee or the Procedure Committee, he is at liberty to do so.

Mr. Patrick McLoughlin (West Derbyshire): Further to that point of order, Madam Speaker.

Madam Speaker: Order. I have dealt with that point. All Ministers in all Governments determine when they issue statements. It is for the Modernisation Committee or the Procedure Committee to consider the matter.

Mr. James Gray (North Wiltshire): On a point of order, Madam Speaker. I was surprised to read in this morning's edition of the *Chippenham News* that the Chancellor of the Exchequer is today visiting the Dyson factory in Malmesbury in my constituency, as I have received no notification of any kind from his private office. Am I right in thinking that that is because I am an Opposition Back Bencher, and that it might have been different were I a Government Back Bencher? At all events, will you confirm that Ministers should always notify Back Benchers when they visit their constituencies?

Madam Speaker: It is custom and practice—and courtesy—for an hon. Member to inform another hon. Member when visiting that hon. Member's constituency. However, I have always made it quite clear that this is really a matter that should be resolved between the hon. Members concerned, and that it should not be dealt with by means of points of order.

Mr. Nicholas Soames (Mid–Sussex): On a point of order, Madam Speaker. You will have seen the news over the weekend that there is to be a very substantial increase in NATO force numbers on the Kosovo border. Given that the NATO force declaration meetings are taking place this week, it is possible that the decision will be made while the House is not sitting. The clear implication is that there may be a fundamental change in approach to NATO's Kosovo strategy. Will you inquire whether it might be possible for the Foreign Secretary or the Secretary of State for Defence to come to the House before the recess to explain exactly what the Government and NATO have in mind?

Madam Speaker: The Government Front Bench will have heard the hon. Gentleman's request. It is not entirely a matter for me. The hon. Gentleman must also, of course, use the usual channels in pressing his point for a statement before the House rises for the recess.

Mr. Patrick McLoughlin (West Derbyshire): On a point of order, Madam Speaker. Bearing in mind what you said to the hon. Member for Thurrock (Mr. Mackinlay) about the substance of his point of order being a matter for the Modernisation Committee, is the fact that the Vote Office often receives the texts of statements before they are made in the Chamber a matter for you?

As the hon. Member for Thurrock said, if an hon. Member leaves the Chamber to get a statement from the Vote Office once that statement has started to be read, you have said that will not call that hon. Member, because he or she will not have been present for the whole statement. However, as that statement is often available at

that time in the Vote Office, hon. Members who are not interested in it are able to see it, while those who are interested are forbidden, by your ruling, from seeing a copy.

Madam Speaker: I would not call an hon. Member who had left the Chamber to get a consultation document or any other document and had therefore missed part of the statement, as that represents a great discourtesy to the Minister answering questions at the Dispatch Box. However, that is not a matter for me, nor for the Vote Office. If hon. Members want to pursue the matter, they should do so in the proper way. The House has two relevant Committees—Modernisation and Procedure. Such matters should be given to those Committees for examination, so as to allow discussions with Ministers on whether they want the texts of their statements to be made available to other hon. Members.

Orders of the Day

Commonwealth Development Corporation Bill *[Lords]*

[Relevant documents: The Second Report from the International Development Committee, Session 1998–99, on The Provisions of the Commonwealth Development Corporation Bill [Lords] (HC 212), the Eighth Report from the International Development Committee, Session 1997–98, on The Future of the Commonwealth Development Corporation (HC 936) and the Government's Response thereto (HC 1100 of Session 1997–98.]

Order for Second Reading read.

4.28 pm

The Secretary of State for International Development (Clare Short): I beg to move, That the Bill be now read a Second time.

I am very pleased to recommend to the House today a Bill that will transform the Commonwealth Development Corporation from a small-scale, Government-owned investment organisation into a public-private partnership that will operate on a larger scale and channel private sector investment into the poorest countries. We hope also that the new CDC will encourage by example much larger flows of foreign investment into the least-developed and poorest economies, by proving that such investment can be safe and profitable.

As the House knows, the Government have given a greatly increased commitment to the promotion of development, and to the reduction of poverty in the poorest countries. We have established a separate Government Department that now has Cabinet status. We have increased that Department's capacity so that it now has expertise on a wider range of policy issues such as trade, debt, international investment, agriculture reform and environmental agreements. The Government can therefore take full account of the needs of developing countries, before deciding on our position in international negotiations on all those issues. We have also reversed the long years of constant decline in the volume of aid spending as a proportion of gross domestic product, by increasing my Department's budget by 28 per cent. over the next three years. That is the largest increase to be made in any Department's budget.

Also, we have re-examined and refocused the Department's work, and in November 1997 we set out our new policy in the White Paper entitled "Eliminating World Poverty: A Challenge for the 21st Century". That White Paper refocuses all the work of the Department on the eradication of poverty and on mobilising the international system to meet the agreed targets of halving by 2015 the proportion of people in the world living in poverty. Other targets include getting all the world's children into basic education, and providing basic health care to all, by the same date.

Mr. Bowen Wells (Hertford and Stortford): Does the Secretary of State share my concern that, although her White Paper is so radical, the House has had no opportunity to debate it, despite promises from the business managers? A thorough debate on the White Paper and its implementation is long overdue.

Clare Short: I certainly agree that the White Paper is worthy of debate. We have had interesting discussions on

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it in the Select Committee on International Development, which the hon. Gentleman chairs so ably. The problem is that the Government are committed to large amounts of new legislation, and it is difficult to get all our business through the House. I take the hon. Gentleman's point, and would welcome any opportunity to hold a debate.

As part of our policy commitment to the systematic reduction of poverty in the poorest countries we have made it clear that development and poverty reduction cannot be achieved through improvements to social policy alone. That is an important point, but it has not been fully accepted in previous debates. Economic growth must outstrip population growth, or poverty will grow. That is what happened to much of sub-Saharan Africa during the 1980s.

We seek to promote Government investment in education for all and in basic health care for all. However, we also seek efficient economic management and the encouragement of a thriving—and responsible—private sector and of inward investment. It is clear that the big increase in economic growth that is needed in the poorest countries will not be achieved unless there is a big increase in inward investment. Our work to encourage development must focus on creating conditions that will encourage increased inward investment in the poorest countries.

For that reason, we propose the transformation of the Commonwealth Development Corporation from a wholly Government-owned institution into a public-private partnership.

Mr. Desmond Swayne (New Forest, West): What is the difference between a public-private partnership and a privatisation, or partial privatisation?

Clare Short: I am about to outline the difference in great detail—although I should have thought that the hon. Gentleman would understand the meanings of words. Privatisation takes something that is owned by the Government and allows commercial rules and market forces to determine its future. A public-private partnership means that the Government retain a stake and that some public sector objectives are entrenched in the relationship with the private sector. That is what we seek to secure—*[Interruption.]* There is no need for the hon. Member for Chesham and Amersham (Mrs. Gillan) to giggle about it; she might find it difficult to understand these matters, but if she listens carefully, she will understand a little more.

Mr. Edward Leigh (Gainsborough): Will the Secretary of State give way?

Clare Short: If the hon. Gentleman wants to speak on the same point, it might help his thought processes a little if I explain it so that he may better understand it.

The Commonwealth Development Corporation was established in 1948 as the Colonial Development Corporation, to develop the resources of the then colonies. It was wholly Government-owned and was funded by loans from Government. Its remit was extended in the 1960s to the independent Commonwealth countries, and, in 1963, it changed its name to the Commonwealth Development Corporation. Since then the corporation has developed a long record of successfully identifying and managing investments in difficult conditions. It has investments in more than 400 enterprises in 55 developing countries.

The corporation has made a substantial contribution to development, and I pay tribute to all the staff who have worked for it so successfully. However, on coming to office, the question that I asked about the CDC—as well as all the other activities of my Department—was whether it could make a bigger contribution.

It was clear that, for as long as the corporation remained in the public sector, it would be constrained by public sector financial controls. Even with our growing development assistance programme, the CDC would obviously face severe limits on available funds. I was therefore very interested in examining whether it was possible to reorganise the CDC so that it could enlarge its investments by tapping into private sector funds.

My second and bigger objective was to examine whether the CDC could be used to leverage larger private sector investment into the poorest countries. If the CDC was bigger and could make investments that achieved a rate of return attractive to the private sector, it could demonstrate that the private sector could invest successfully in countries that it currently shuns. That is a second and important part of my objective in recommending the reorganisation of the CDC.

We therefore propose to create a new CDC that is a true public-private partnership and which provides for direct private sector involvement and also for the on-going involvement of the Government as a partner. We see that as a long-term partnership and we intend to retain a substantial minority holding in the CDC for the foreseeable future. That means that the Government will have a long-term stake in CDC's success.

As well as our ordinary shareholding, the Government will hold a golden share, which will exist as long as we have a substantial interest in the CDC. That will protect the CDC's investment and ethical policies and, therefore, its development role.

Mr. Nicholas Soames (Mid–Sussex): I warmly welcome the step that the right hon. Lady is taking, and pay tribute to the work of the Commonwealth Development Corporation. Does she agree, however, that, while the Government will retain a golden share, it will be important for the CDC to secure from where it wishes the funds that it needs for its future development? Does she agree that it should be able to go to capital markets outside as well as in this country?

Clare Short: The CDC is free at the moment to raise funds offshore because it is not constrained by the rules on a publicly owned investment organisation. One of the major reasons for the CDC's ceasing to be wholly Government owned is to enable it to raise funds within Britain to enlarge its investment portfolio.

Several hon. Members *rose—*

Clare Short: Perhaps I may finish this paragraph and then I will give way to all the hon. Gentlemen—I think that they are Gentlemen—who are attempting to intervene. Of course, I am not questioning their gentlemanliness.

Let us be clear that a continuing Government role is necessary to protect the CDC's development role. The hon. Member for Chesham and Amersham might like to concentrate on that point. Pure privatisation would simply drive the CDC out of the least-developed countries. A privatised CDC would simply behave like other commercial investment companies. A wholly publicly owned CDC is limited in the way in which I described. The public-private partnership is thus essential to our objective of increasing private sector investment and ensuring that that goes to the poorest countries.

Mr. Gary Streeter (South–West Devon): The Secretary of State has described the primary difference between a public-private partnership and a partial privatisation, which is that the Government intend to retain their minority holding for the foreseeable future. Obviously, that presupposes that the Government may get rid of that holding at some stage. If they do, will the CDC still be a public-private partnership?

Clare Short: It is not merely a case of the monetary holding but also of the golden share to which I alluded. If the hon. Gentleman has read the debate in another place as I am sure he has, he will understand that. If the Government got rid of their golden share and all the principles that are entrenched—where the CDC will invest and the ethical principles of investment—the CDC would be privatised. I have worked hard to ensure that that cannot be done without returning to the House. There was a technical difficulty, but we have secured that now and that is right.

Mr. Leigh: May I return to the question that my hon. Friend the Member for New Forest, West (Mr. Swayne) asked? I am not clear how the present proposal differs from privatisation. After all, in previous privatisations the Government retained a golden share. The essence of a privatisation is that the Government sell the majority of their shares. How is this proposal different from an effective privatisation?

Clare Short: Oh dear me! I think the hon. Gentleman was a Minister in the previous Government and yet he was obviously not clear about what they were up to. There were transitional golden shares to assist privatisation, but they were all phased out. This is an indefinite golden share and that is the difference. I hope that I have helped.

Mr. David Heath (Somerton and Frome): Perhaps we can move away from the definition of privatisation. One of the knottiest problems with which the Secretary of State's Department has been wrestling is the future tax status of the corporation. Will she explain what that will be during her remarks today, or will we have to wait for the Standing Committee, in which case it will make it more difficult to have a reasoned debate on the subject?

Clare Short: I shall explain how we will do that today. The principle is agreed and clear but the full details and the amendment will be introduced in Committee.

The emphasis of the partnership will be on the CDC continuing to do what it does best: investing in the poorest countries that other investors shun. Its purpose will be to maximise the creation and long-term growth of viable businesses in developing countries—especially the poorer countries—to achieve attractive returns for shareholders, and to implement social, environmental and ethical best practice. The challenge is to ensure that the CDC continues to focus on the poorer countries. It may help Opposition Members in understanding the difference between privatisation and partnership to know that that focus will be secured through the investment policy required under the articles of association, a copy of which has been placed in the Library. Hon. Members who made points of order might like to know that.

The policy sets out a list of developing countries for whose benefit the CDC may invest, and requires that at least 70 per cent. of its investment over a rolling five-year period is for the benefit of the poorer of those countries. It also states that the CDC will aim to ensure that 50 per cent. of its investment each year will be for the benefit of sub-Saharan Africa or south Asia and notes several sectors, such as manufacture of equipment for military purposes, in which it may not invest.

Mr. Andrew Robathan (Blaby): The Secretary of State knows that the Select Committee considered that difficult issue. If the policy changes slightly, or military investments are made, what sanctions will be imposed—short of sacking the whole staff by using the golden share? How exactly will the ethical policy be enforced?

Clare Short: It will be entrenched through the articles and through a series of procedures such as the ethical committee, on which appointees of the Secretary of State will have a majority. The policy will not be amendable without the consent of that committee. The ultimate sanction is the golden share. None of that will be changeable without a majority on the committee and the permission of the golden shareholder. The policy should not be immutable because there may be improvements in the ethical policy, or the poorest countries may develop so that we need to change the list, but it is entrenched so that change to it cannot be forced by market forces. Investors will know that it is a permanent, unchangeable part of the organisation's structure.

Mr. Andrew Tyrie (Chichester): What will happen if the CDC makes losses? Will a proportion score against the public sector financial deficit? Rather than the approach taken so far to get money to the least-developed countries, have the Government considered the development of a loan insurance scheme?

Clare Short: The CDC will be a private limited company with minority Government ownership under the same rules as any other plc. There are already all sorts of loan insurance systems. The Export Credits Guarantee Department is, in a way, such a system, and there is also the World Bank MIGA—Multilateral Investment Guarantee Agency—loan insurance system. The short answer is no.

Mr. Tyrie: Those are subsidised insurance schemes.

Clare Short: Indeed, but as the hon. Gentleman knows, one reason why the private sector will not invest in such countries is political instability and weak enforcement of bank regulation and contracts. My Department, the World Bank and others now work with much better understanding, especially after the east Asian crisis, of the

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conditions for beneficial inward investment, but there is always a reputation time-lag. If the CDC can be a cutting edge player that comes in earlier to demonstrate track record and rate of return, it will increase the private sector flow into countries that are shunned. That is the whole idea. The investment policy that I have described will be put in place before private participation is invited and the partnership is established; any subsequent changes to it will require the agreement of a majority of ordinary shareholders and the golden shareholder. The investment policy will entrench the CDC's focus on developing countries.

As I have said, we expect the CDC to operate as an exemplary social, environmental and ethical business. That approach is reflected in its business principles and policies, which cover social, environmental, health and safety matters and business ethics, as well as a statement of the general principles by which the CDC will conduct its business. Copies of those principles and policies are available in the Library. The CDC is to be congratulated on those documents, which reflect a great deal of careful thought. They have been developed over the past 15 months through a full consultation process, involving staff throughout the organisation. The precise mechanisms for dealing with any changes to those policies will differ from those for the investment policy, reflecting the fact that they will continue to evolve in line with best practice—as I pointed out earlier—but they will also be entrenched in the company's constitution and protected under golden shareholder reserved rights.

I am confident that those mechanisms will be effective in securing the CDC's development role. We consider that it is absolutely essential that those policies, and the mechanisms to protect them, are clearly set out from the start in the partnership framework and in the company's constitution. They will then be an essential part of the company's identity and will be clear to all future investors.

As hon. Members would expect, before my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister announced the proposed partnership at the Commonwealth Heads of Government conference in October 1997, we had commissioned expert external advice on the viability of the proposal. The advice made it clear that, provided that the partnership was well designed, there was likely to be strong private sector interest in investing in the new CDC. Clearly, that is our aim and I therefore took pains to ensure that the design of the new CDC would make it attractive to private sector investors.

A CDC that will attract private investment requires a framework such as the one that I described, so that there is no fear of unpredictable Government interference. The public sector interest is strong and clear; it will be entrenched from the start and will not depend on the exercise of unpredictable intervention—for example, intervention from one Minister after another changing their mind, or as a result of a change of Government. The principles will be entrenched, so that anyone considering investing in the corporation will be able to see what future performance is likely to be. That also means setting an appropriate capital structure for the CDC and ensuring that the CDC is tax efficient, so that it can compete with other comparable institutions, as has been pointed out.

There has been some media interest in the CDC's tax treatment. It was most important to ensure that the tax treatment was right, and that took a little time. However, I am now confident that it is right. It is obvious that the CDC has to be able to compete with offshore funds, if it is to achieve its goal of investing in developing countries using capital raised in a competitive private investment market dominated by offshore funds. From the start, it was clear to me at least that it would be unacceptable for a major instrument of the UK's development policy to be based offshore. I realise that, some time ago, the hon. Member for South–West Devon (Mr. Streeter) said to the *Financial Times* that it should be offshore.

Mr. Streeter: I said "could be".

Clare Short: No, the hon. Gentleman said "should". In effect, he said, "Stop dithering—put it offshore."

It seems to me that a body with a major golden share in a Government holding, which is an instrument of our development policy, should be based in Britain. I asked my advisers where it could be based offshore because I thought that it might be bearable to place it in Africa, but they replied, "The Cayman Islands—or Ireland." It would be nice if it were in Ireland, but this is a British—a United Kingdom—development institution.

Mr. Streeter: Jersey.

Clare Short: They did not suggest Jersey, and I do not think that Jersey would do the trick for the purpose of competing with other offshore funds. That was the origin of the tax problem: other funds go offshore and benefit from very low tax, but an instrument of British development should be based in Britain or, I should say, in the United Kingdom. That was the circle that we had to square.

With the Treasury and the Inland Revenue, we considered all possible options, and I can today announce our conclusion that we should provide tailored tax treatment for the CDC public-private partnership. We discussed whether there should be a class of development institutions, which would have been another way of approaching the problem, but we settled on a tailored tax treatment that will enable the CDC to compete for funds with companies that are based offshore. That treatment will endure so long as the Government hold their golden share in the CDC. The main element will be exemption for the CDC from corporation tax arising on income and chargeable gains from its investment activities. Instructions have been sent to parliamentary counsel and I intend to table the necessary amendments in Committee. The solution is a good one which will enable the CDC to compete fairly and be a major instrument of British development policy.

The International Development Committee has also expressed interest in the CDC's capital structure, and it is right to say that restructuring is needed. Currently, the CDC's balance sheet consists of about £750 million of interest-free debt to Government and reserves of some £515 million; obviously, as a public corporation, it does not have any share capital. We intend to restructure the CDC's capital to create a balance sheet which potential investors will recognise as commercially viable and which will be a strong balance sheet, suited to the CDC's

business needs. We do not propose to leave interest-free loans on the balance sheet once the partnership is established; that would, in effect, be a subsidy to shareholders, which is clearly wrong. We shall restructure the loans into equity, or commercial loans, or a mixture of the two. We shall keep the International Development Committee fully informed as those decisions are made, and lay any proposals before the House.

As the House will know, there is always a potential state aids angle in any Government sale. After informal soundings with the European Commission, we do not consider that tax or balance sheet proposals will either distort intra-Community trade, or be likely to create any difficulty. However, to provide investors with certainty, we plan to notify the Commission at the same time as we inform it of the capital restructuring—a process required to ensure that there is no hidden subsidy in capital restructuring. We expect speedy clearance from the Commission on both questions.

As I have made clear, we want to encourage wide participation in the CDC, and that will ultimately lead to our seeking a listing. The CDC's business principles will ensure that it is very much an ethical investment, so it is likely to appeal to the growing sector of ethical investors. However, we do not intend to target ethical investors alone: interest could also be expected from, for example, those who are already targeting emerging markets and who are interested in moving into poorer frontier markets.

The timing of a listing will depend on several factors, including market perceptions of pre-emerging markets and of the CDC's track record and forecast performance. The key will be to ensure that new capital is introduced at the right time for the success of the CDC's business. However, we recognise that listing might not be possible at the time when other conditions are right for creation of the partnership; in that case, we would look at alternatives for a transitional period. For example, the CDC might have a good track record, but if there is turbulence in emerging markets, the time might not be right for a listing. We must move at the right times and to the right stages during the process of transformation.

The CDC's financial track record is obviously a key issue. Clearly, 1998 was a very difficult year for emerging markets. The International Finance Corporation, which is part of the World Bank group, produces an index that measures, for example, what is happening in emerging markets; it fell by 22 per cent. in 1998. Against that background, the CDC's performance was creditable: although for the first time in many years it made a loss in 1998, that was largely due to provisions against investments in Indonesia and Pakistan; although the underlying investments were good, the provisions were necessary because foreign exchange problems meant it was not possible to get money out of those countries.

Overall revenue in 1998 was £147.2 million with an operating surplus of £110.4 million. Although both figures are lower than in 1997, they have held up well in difficult market conditions. In previous years, the CDC has generally achieved profitability targets, with returns comparable to or above those of other development finance institutions. However, it is obvious that returns at historical CDC levels will not be enough to attract private investors.

Mrs. Cheryl Gillan (Chesham and Amersham): The Secretary of State obviously examines the CDC's figures. Does she envisage that the CDC will make a loss in the next financial year or return to its position of the year before last?

Clare Short: I have not made such a projection, and I do not think it would be useful for me to do so. The CDC runs its own business. Although I exercise some supervisory powers, I do not consider myself to be an expert when it comes to the economic performance of emerging markets. I read about such matters with a great deal of interest, but I do not think my predictions would be very valuable in guiding the CDC in its investment operations.

We are confident that the CDC will be able to increase its profitability and make the returns needed to attract private investors. Much of the improvement will come from the CDC's capturing for itself more of the profitability of the investments it makes. Historically, the CDC has largely invested in secured debt, which is obviously relatively low risk and therefore offers low returns. In preparation for the partnership and to increase its capacity to attract private sector funds, the CDC has started the process of shifting to risk capital—meaning equity and quasi-equity. It will, therefore, capture a higher return on its investments.

In 1998, more than 60 per cent. of new investments were risk capital, compared with around 30 per cent. in 1997. That is important not just in order to attract private sector funds but from a development point of view. Equity investment leads to a stronger commitment to the development of a business with long-term growth prospects. Risk capital is in short supply in the poorer countries. A larger CDC creating more equity investment will bring much greater benefits to developing countries.

Mr. Andrew Rowe (Faversham and Mid–Kent): Some of us are concerned that the easiest way for the CDC to make serious savings on its overheads in difficult market conditions is by closing some of its offices in countries where its investment is coming to an end. Yet, when the CDC gave evidence before the Committee, it pointed out that one of its best selling points was its unrivalled network of offices in countries in which few of its competitors were active. Has the Secretary of State discussed with the CDC the fact that, in order to make itself more attractive to the capital market, it is in danger of eliminating the very asset that makes it an attractive development instrument?

Clare Short: The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right. That is what would have happened if we had simply privatised the CDC and it had cut costs by closing offices in difficult markets and moving to easier markets. That is why we must have a partnership and why we have had to entrench the rulings about the countries in which the CDC invests. We have said that at least 50 per cent. of the CDC's investment in developing countries must go to the poorer countries, which will prevent the search for greater returns leading to the kind of action that the hon. Gentleman described. This measure is designed deliberately and carefully to prevent that outcome.

The hon. Gentleman will be aware that the low-risk loan investments that the CDC has taken in the past have the first call on return and offer low rates of return. An equity stake in a business offers an interest in its long-term creativity. By opting for equity, one potentially

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increases the rate of return and commits to creating in developing countries businesses with a capacity to generate more long-term economic growth. The move to equity is necessary to attract private sector investment, but it will also bring benefits by helping to create businesses in developing countries.

Mr. Streeter: Has not the Secretary of State forgotten the other part of the equation? The reason why equity investments are often referred to as risk capital is, of course, that they have no security, and if the company in which one is investing fails, one might lose the total value of the investment. At least with secured loans, more often than not, one gets back some of the asset and is able to recover some of the investment. Will the right hon. Lady take that into account? The shift from secured loans to equity alone will not, perhaps, give her the uplifting returns that she seeks.

Clare Short: The hon. Gentleman does not seem to understand the whole purpose of the exercise, which is to get more private sector investment into countries into which it currently does not flow. That will be done directly through the CDC and by proving, through the CDC, that such private sector investment can be profitable and secure. The rates of return that the CDC, as a lender of last resort in very secure loans, at present achieves will not attract the private sector. The CDC must be able to handle equity investment if it is to succeed in bringing private sector investment into developing countries, which will not thrive economically unless we can bring them more such investment. It might help the hon. Gentleman if he reads my explanation in *Hansard* later.

Mrs. Maria Fyfe (Glasgow, Maryhill): I have very little knowledge or experience of the stock market, but a question has occurred to me while I have been listening to my right hon. Friend. If the CDC should go into substantial profit, would there be an opportunity both for private sector investors to have a reasonable return on their capital and for there to be greater investment in developing countries?

Clare Short: My hon. Friend describes the position exactly. At the moment, the private sector tends not to invest at all in sub-Saharan Africa. She will know that during recent globalisation, the international flow of private sector investment has massively increased, but 90 per cent. of that goes to the 11 most-developed countries and very little goes to the rest. The Bill's purpose and the objective of successful development is to create conditions in which the private sector will want to invest in the poorest countries. If equity investment brings a commitment to more creative companies in those countries and a higher rate of return, investment in those countries will be attractive to the private sector, which is the overwhelming objective of this exercise.

In the past, the CDC has also tended to be a lender of last resort because it is a public sector institution, so it is required not to compete for investments that are attractive to the private sector, as the hon. Member for South–West Devon will know. It is, in effect, required to seek a rate of return that is lower than the commercial rate; otherwise, the public sector would be unfairly crowding out the private sector. The new CDC will no longer be constrained by being wholly publicly owned, so it will be able to seek good investments that offer attractive financial returns and make a greater contribution to sustainable development.

The Bill is the first stage in the creation of the public-private partnership that I have described. The Bill is largely technical, and the policy issues that I have outlined—other than the entrenchment of the Government's shareholding—do not generally appear in the Bill. As I have said, those issues are covered in the background papers that have been deposited in the Library, and they are essential to understanding the Bill's purpose and effects.

The Bill, taken narrowly, covers four main areas. The first is the provisions needed to transform the CDC into a public limited company. Initially, the Government will hold all the shares. The intention is to proceed with that transformation as soon as practical after the Bill becomes law. As I have explained, the timing of the eventual sale of the majority holding will depend on a number of factors and in particular on market conditions.

Although the transformation of the CDC is a technical issue, I should explain a little further why we are proceeding in the way that we have chosen. At the moment, the CDC is a statutory corporation that is obviously not a suitable legal vehicle for the partnership. The Bill departs from the technique usually employed in privatisations whereby legislation transfers the assets of the public corporation to a newly formed successor company. Instead, the Bill transforms the CDC directly into a public limited company without creating a new legal entity. No transfers of assets are involved, because the CDC retains the same legal identity and remains in being, both before and after the transformation.

That legal technique is being used because many CDC assets are held abroad. Had the successor company method been used, every individual asset would have had to be transferred under the local laws applying in all countries in which it operates. That would have been laborious and time-consuming, to say the least. We were pleased to find such a good legal remedy to what was at first a headache.

The second area contains provisions that are needed to restructure the CDC's balance sheet. As I have explained, it will be necessary to give it a financial structure that suits the needs of the partnership. That part of the Bill also makes provision for the continuation of Government financial assistance while CDC plc is wholly owned by the Government—subject to a cash limit.

The third area is tax. Clause 27(3) says that the Act shall not come into force until a draft order that makes provision for tax treatment for the CDC has been laid and approved. As I said, I intend to table detailed amendments in Committee which will set out the tax treatment to apply to the CDC, which I described earlier.

Clause 18 entrenches the Government's role in CDC plc. As I have made it clear, the Bill creates a partnership between the Government and the private sector, involving a substantial and long-term Government interest. Given that proposal, as I have said in answer to questions, if a future Secretary of State wanted to dissolve the partnership and fully privatise the CDC, he or she should be required to seek Parliament's approval before doing so.

Mr. Rowe: A thought has just occurred to me; I wonder whether the Secretary of State could set my

mind at rest. Should the CDC incur losses over the next few years, they will not fall on her departmental development budget—will they?

Clare Short: The Department will hold a minority share; profits will go to it. It would have the same liability as the majority of shareholders if there were a sustained period of loss. However, the likelihood is that there will be gains, not losses, to the Department. A disaster would have some consequence, but it would not be major or one about which the hon. Gentleman needs to be concerned. Logically, if the thing were to collapse completely, the loss of value in shares would affect the Department.

Clause 18 entrenches the requirement for Parliament's approval for any change or desire to privatise. It does so by entrenching the two key aspects of the Government's side of the partnership: first, a substantial economic interest and, secondly, the golden share, with the important rights that it reserves to the Secretary of State. Clause 18 requires the Government to hold at least 25 per cent. of the CDC's ordinary share capital and to continue to hold the golden share. The clause cannot be amended or repealed without Parliament's consent. I think that I said to the Select Committee that I was struggling with that matter. Members of the Committee will be pleased to hear that we found a solution.

Clause 18 also prevents a Secretary of State from agreeing to changes in the CDC's constitution that would diminish the Government's rights as holder of the golden share, except with the approval of Parliament. Together, the provisions of clause 18 will ensure that the fundamental nature of the partnership, as it is being presented today, cannot be altered without Parliament's consent. I am sure that that is right.

We cannot reduce poverty in the world without faster economic growth in the poorest countries. Such growth will not be achieved without higher investment, and that requires much higher inward investment. There is massive and ever-growing capital investment around the world, but, sadly, very little of it flows to the poorest countries. We hope that the new CDC will help to improve that, both by channelling private sector investment and by acting as an example to other investment institutions, showing that such investment can be profitable. I commend the Bill to the House.

5.9 pm

Mr. Gary Streeter (South–West Devon): For more than 50 years, Conservatives have supported the Commonwealth Development Corporation. For 35 of those 50 years, when in government, we nurtured and encouraged it and its important work in investing in the developing world—investing in business and in people and bringing hope and dignity where there was none. During those years, the CDC created thousands of jobs and changed thousands of lives. Conservative Members pay warm tribute to the skill and dedication of its staff, who have achieved so much over the past half-century.

Today's debate is really about how we can best take the CDC into the 21st century, to help even more effectively the millions of people in the world who live in abject poverty. The words "abject poverty" are easy to say, but the misery, squalor and pain which are the daily experience of so many people alive today and which those simple words represent, must motivate us to do something about it. I pay tribute to the Secretary of State for the attempts that she has made since taking up her post to do precisely that.

It is a good thing to care about the problems of the world's poorest, but it is even better to do something about them. The CDC has played its part in the past, and must do so in the future.

There are three key economic ways of improving living standards in the developing world. On the one hand, well-targeted aid has a part to play in meeting people's needs; on the other hand, the private sector and foreign direct investment are vital in generating the wealth and jobs that are necessary to transform the prospects of the world's poorest. Somewhere between those two key pillars has been the role of the CDC. It is not concerned with aid, and it is not—strictly speaking—the private sector. It is a vehicle for investing in small businesses, taking a stake in a community, stimulating private enterprise and supporting local entrepreneurs. That is what the CDC has been good at for 50 years. It has been a necessary halfway house between aid and private sector investment, and our role as the Opposition is to ensure that the Bill does not undermine its vital developmental role.

Mr. Rowe: I hope that my hon. Friend will include in his encomium evidence given by the CDC that, to the largest extent practicable, it has upheld a non-corrupt form of trading for 50 years. In response to a question from us, it claimed that one of its biggest single assets was the fact that its reputation enabled it to browbeat those who tried to corrupt it, and to refuse to be corrupted.

Mr. Streeter: I pay tribute to my hon. Friend, who is second to none in his understanding of the word "encomium".

I agree with my hon. Friend. We know that, sadly, corruption is a real issue in far too many countries. The integrity of the CDC, and the model that it has been able to provide over the years, have been an important part of the performance of this excellent corporation.

It is well known that, at the same time as nurturing the CDC's activities over the past 20 years, the Conservative party has been promoting privatisation and removing the dead hand of the state from many former nationalised industries. That is well known to the Secretary of State, who has opposed every one of our privatisations. Conservative Members believe in the private sector, and in marketplace solutions. I have worked as a lawyer in the private sector for 20 years and more, advising business people on, primarily, buying and selling private limited companies. I have also seen the public sector at close quarters, notably while I was a Minister in the last Government. The public sector is necessary, and can be excellent; but there are many things that the private sector can do better, and investing in businesses is an obvious target area.

For a large part of our 18 years in government, we examined ways of securing more private sector involvement in the CDC. We considered whether we could privatise it, in full or in part, and how we could harness and focus private sector energy and resources without hurting the people whom the CDC had been set up to support. The problem, of course, was finding a way in which to produce an attractive return for private sector

[Mr. Streeter]

investors without letting go of the CDC's vital developmental nature. We could have done it easily if we had been prepared to risk hurting the poorest of the poor in the developing world, but we were not prepared to do that.

Meanwhile, while we were privatising and changing for ever the economic and industrial landscape of the United Kingdom, the Secretary of State, then in opposition, was roaming around attacking the evils of privatisation at every turn. What a delicious irony: the person who, at her core, opposes and despises privatisation and the private sector, should now be tasked with putting into effect new Labour's first privatisation.

Clare Short: There is hardly anyone here, it is a serious matter and the hon. Gentleman still has to play silly infant school games. I have been a member of the Labour party since my youth and have always believed in the mixed economy. There is a role for the state and for markets. Under his Government, the market part of the role got way out of control.

My Department gives advice to the former Communist countries and to many developing countries about privatisation. I say to them, "Learn from our mistakes. Do not give big windfall gains to the private sector. Do it fairly and efficiently, so that you get good services. Learn from the mistakes of the British Tory Government." People worldwide are doing that.

Mr. Streeter: I am delighted that the right hon. Lady has learned from her mistakes. None the less, she must accept the fact that, throughout the 1980s, she bitterly opposed every privatisation that was introduced by the then Conservative Government, who transformed our economic and political landscape.

When we heard the Prime Minister announce the privatisation, we all wondered how the Secretary of State would be able to come to terms with perhaps her great personal challenge to date: to privatise something that even Conservative Governments for 18 years could not find a way to privatise without hurting the people whom the CDC was set up to help.

We waited with bated breath. Surely even the Secretary of State would not be able to pull off such an amazing volte-face, but, when it emerged, the solution was a classic piece of new Labourism. We should have guessed. The solution was simply to change the name. The Secretary of State opposes privatisation, so do not call it that; call it "public-private partnership" instead. It is Orwellian double-speak at its best.

The Bill converts the Commonwealth Development Corporation into a Companies Act company, of which up to 75 per cent. will be sold in one tranche to the private sector, with provision for the remaining shareholding to be sold in due course. It is privatisation in all its glory. It may be a partial privatisation to start—up to 75 per cent.—but that is how many of our privatisation took place in the 1980s. It is privatisation. If it looks like a dog, walks like a dog and barks like a dog, it is probably a dog. The Bill will privatise the Commonwealth Development Corporation. I know it, the Secretary of State knows it, the whole House knows it.

Therein lies my concern at what the Secretary of State is trying to do with the CDC. It is not that introducing the private sector is, in itself, wrong; of course not. We of all people would be hard pushed to argue that. It is that the Secretary of State is not owning up to the reality of what she is doing. If she does not face up to the reality of what she is doing, she will inevitably be blind to the dangers and pitfalls of taking the CDC down the path that is set out in the Bill. There is a real risk that the CDC will be sold cheaply, shareholder pressure will take it away from its developmental objectives, and the people whom the CDC was set up to help will be left behind.

During the passage of the Bill, our aim is to ensure that those dangers have been fully and properly considered and that, when we finally come to vote on Third Reading, every hon. Member can do so in the full knowledge of what they are doing. It is like that with the Government: if people want to know what they are doing, never mind the headlines, read the small print.

Dr. Jenny Tonge (Richmond Park): I am sure that the hon. Gentleman speaks from great experience about selling things off cheaply, but, before he goes any further, can he make it absolutely clear that his party sees no other way: either the CDC is a Government-owned company, or it is privatised? He is saying that his party sees no middle road whatever. He has made a categoric statement this afternoon.

Mr. Streeter: There is, of course, a case for retaining the CDC in the public sector while seeking to improve its performance. There is also a case for fully and properly privatising the CDC, and for at least obtaining a proper return for the Department for International Development budget. However, there is absolutely no case for selling the CDC off cheap—so that, over time, shareholders will inevitably and increasingly force its board to consider primarily the bottom line, thus moving the CDC away from its developmental objectives. That is the prospect staring us in the face as we consider the legislation, and that is my concern.

We shall not divide the House on Second Reading. However, in Committee, we shall want to explore in detail four key issues. First, have the CDC's developmental principles been adequately protected; or will the Bill destroy that heritage? Secondly, will the Department for International Development budget receive a fair price for our taxpayers' investment over the past 50 years? Thirdly, will the privatisation protect the poorest in the developing world—the very people whom the CDC was established to help? Fourthly, do the Government's proposals for the tax treatment of the new CDC deserve our support? Unless we are satisfied on those four key issues in Committee, we shall reserve our position on Third Reading.

Once private sector shareholders are involved, they will want to drive the company to increased profits and better returns on their investment. Such a development is inevitable, entirely natural and understandable. Therefore, the question is whether the Bill will secure the CDC adequately to its developmental moorings, to prevent it being driven out to the sea of commercial return, leaving behind the reason why it was established initially.

If the Bill is passed as drafted, the way forward is sadly clear. It is likely that, in a year or two, 75 per cent. of the company will be sold off, probably—as the CDC's financial track record in recent years has been so modest—at a bargain-basement price. Investors in the

company will be pension funds, which are able to bide their time and to see a long-term opportunity. After a few years of the CDC seeking to strike a balance between developmental objectives and making a return for its shareholders, the company will almost certainly fail.

The CDC's rate of return is less than 8 per cent. It will have to get that up to 15 per cent. or more, and that will be hard to do unless it is guided only by bottom-line considerations. The Secretary of State explained that the CDC will be able to increase its rate of return from 8 to 18 per cent., primarily by shifting money from secured loans to equity investments. Of course it is true that potentially greater reward may come by investing in equities rather than loans, but the risks of loss also may be greater.

There is absolutely no guarantee that moving from secured loans to unsecured equities will boost returns. If there were such a guarantee, why do not all United Kingdom banks forget about lending money to companies and simply invest in share capital? The point of risk capital is that one may not only increase one's return, but lose one's investment.

Clare Short: Does the hon. Gentleman think that it is possible for the poorest and least-developed countries to attract private sector investment? If he is right in his critique, no investment in those countries will be attractive to the private sector. Although I know that he is wrong about that, perhaps he will either agree that he is wrong, or state plainly that he believes that those economies will never attract private sector investment and, therefore, are in long-term difficulty.

Mr. Streeter: I do not think that the Secretary of State is listening to me—I was not saying that at all. One of the points that I shall make in a moment is that many private sector investors are already investing in those emerging markets. However, the CDC that she is shaping for the future will simply become another investment bank or investment fund manager. Unless we get the matter right—this is why we have to examine it very carefully in Committee—the CDC will not be distinctive from any other fund manager.

Of course we want private sector investment in emerging markets, but such investment is already being made. Surely it is right that the CDC should play a particular and peculiar role in development, as it was established to do.

I am not saying that it is wrong for the CDC to move from loan to equity. I am simply saying that, in a volatile market, such a move may not offer the panacea that the Secretary of State believes it will. What will happen if investors in the new CDC do not receive the rate of return that they are expecting? She has not answered that question.

The directors of the CDC are people of good faith. They will try hard to meet the financial targets, while remaining true to what they understand to be the CDC's developmental focus. We wish them well and hope that they succeed but, if the rates of return are not adequate, the shareholders will gradually turn the screw, insisting on higher-value investments and better returns. Gradually, the developmental focus will be all but forgotten as the new CDC becomes just another investment bank or fund manager. I have noticed before that, when the Secretary of State knows that she has lost the argument, she starts chatting to the person next to her. I wish that she would listen. She might learn more about the industry.

Clare Short *rose—*

Mr. Streeter: Does the right hon. Lady want me to give way?

Clare Short: That is what standing up at the Dispatch Box means. I was saying to my hon. Friend the Under-Secretary, "Poor chap, he cannot seem to understand how the entrenched requirements on the proportions of investment make what he is suggesting impossible." I was listening to the hon. Gentleman. It would have been rude to make my comment loudly, so I made it quietly, but as he wants me to be rude in public, let me be so.

Mr. Streeter: I am grateful to the Secretary of State, because she has made my case. I shall explain why she has not entrenched the developmental objectives of the CDC in the Bill. She thinks that she has done so by saying which countries the CDC can invest in, and through and by the incorporation of the statement of business principles, but that does not protect against shareholders wanting to take the investment portfolio away from creating jobs and investing in long-term communities in the developing world and putting it into high-value, high-tech investment that will result in the CDC being no different from any other investment bank or fund manager. She has not entrenched that principle properly. The shareholders will gradually turn the screw, insisting on higher-value investments and better returns. Gradually, the developmental focus will be all but forgotten as the new CDC becomes just another investment bank. The CDC that is filling the vital gap between aid and the full-blown private sector will, little by little, inch by inch, relocate itself firmly in the private sector investment camp, leaving a huge void behind it.

I do not take any pride in saying that. I wish that the truth were otherwise. I want the plan to succeed, but the Secretary of State expects us to vote tamely for the Bill. She hates criticism and questions. I am simply trying to point out to her that she may not have achieved her objectives. I wish that she had discovered a magical way of combining two mutually inconsistent principles—riding two horses at the same time—but I fear that she has not. It is likely that, within a few short years, all the noble aspirations of the CDC when it started 50 years ago will have been left behind.

The Secretary of State thinks that she has entrenched the CDC's development principles but, after closer examination, I fear that she has not. I was sent the statement of business principles on 11 May. It is a worthy document and I do not disagree with a single word in it. It contains some excellent phrases. It says:

"The way we do business is to set out in our mandate:

To maximise CDC's success in creating and growing long term viable businesses in developing economies, achieving attractive returns for shareholders and implementing ethical best practice."

It says that the CDC will

"be open and honest in our dealings, while respecting commercial and personal confidentiality".

[Mr. Streeter]

It talks about the core values, saying that it will

"recognise that economic development results in environmental change"

and that

"Sustainable development seeks to maximise the potential of environmental resources".

It is all good stuff and I support it. However, the mission statements and developmental principles of other large corporations use almost identical language. Shell says:

"We aspire to be a leader in the economic, environmental and social aspects of everything we do; first choice for our shareholders, our customers, our employees, those with whom we do business, society and future generations.

We will strive to help to build a better world in which current and future generations enjoy greater economic, social and environmental security.

We will embrace the concept of sustainable development in our business decisions, large and small. In this way we will continue to create value for our shareholders and society, while being responsive to society's changing expectations."

I do not criticise the CDC's business principles, and I certainly do not criticise Shell's. I simply say that the adoption of those principles by the CDC is no more than any major international player does these days. It is part and parcel of today's global business environment, and it does not protect the special developmental status of the CDC.

The principles do not in any way prevent the CDC from investing in top-drawer, highly successful companies which make high-tech products, employing only a handful of local people, in the permitted countries. Nothing in the statement of business principles prevents that investment from becoming the norm. If I am wrong, the Secretary of State can intervene and tell me so.

The second attempt at entrenchment is to insist that 70 per cent. of all the CDC's investments are limited to an agreed number of developing countries, 50 per cent. in sub-Saharan Africa or south Asia. That is set out in the investment policy and, again, I support it. There is a long list of countries—involving about two thirds of the world—including South Africa, India, China, Zimbabwe and Kenya.

Surely the Secretary of State will not pretend that that measure prevents the new CDC from becoming a commercially driven investor in those emerging markets, no different from any other such investor. That is already happening. When I was in Kenya recently, I spoke to one of the CDC's field managers, who was being instructed to move away from the long-term, job-creating, community-focused investment on which the CDC has built its reputation. He was now being encouraged to look at shopping malls, office complexes and high-tech companies—sectors in which several other private investors are operating.

There are examples of fund managers investing in emerging markets. Perpetual Investors talks about its funds in Thailand, the Philippines, India, Taiwan, Indonesia and Malaysia. Genesis Emerging Market Funds has significant investments in Botswana, Ghana, Jordan, Kenya, Lebanon, Mauritius, Oman, Saudi Arabia, South Africa and Zimbabwe. Hundreds of private sector investment organisations are beginning to invest in the emerging markets—and a good thing, too. My concern is that others are doing what the CDC is gradually going to get into.

The moorings to which the Secretary of State is attaching the new CDC are too weak, and the currents tugging the new CDC out to sea will be strong, and will get stronger. We know that a burgeoning private sector is the very thing that those developing countries need, but other organisations can help provide that. The Secretary of State is not facing up to the radical change of direction for the CDC that she is instigating. Unless we can strengthen the Bill in Committee, the likelihood is that, in not many years, the CDC will have floated free from its developmental moorings. The House should consider the Bill in the light of that clear risk.

A host of other matters need to be looked at carefully in Committee. The tax treatment of the CDC is a critical concern. As long ago as 7 July 1998, the Select Committee on International Development was told by the Secretary of State that preferential tax treatment would be forthcoming. She explained that it has been longer in coming than she would have liked, and that is fair enough. However, it is disappointing.

The House of Commons is debating the Second Reading of a major Bill, which has the consequences that I have explained. The tax treatment is at the centre of whether the company succeeds and flourishes in the private sector. We do not have a scrap of paper that tells us what that tax treatment is. That is not good enough. It is all very well to say that it will be brought before us in Committee, but the Committee is likely to start in a fortnight. Surely we could have the information now. We must reserve all our positions in relation to the tax treatment of the company.

Is the Secretary of State really saying that the Government will create a special tax status for one company in the United Kingdom, 75 per cent. of which will be owned by the private sector? What an extraordinary idea. She says that going offshore would be wrong. What is wrong with CDC funds going offshore? Has she consulted the Prime Minister, who talks about globalisation and our role in the global economy? Why is placing funds on a tax-efficient offshore basis politically unacceptable?

It is an abuse of the House to treat us in this way. We want to consider carefully the balance sheet of the new CDC; to clarify the future position of Government guarantees and soft loans; and to know when it is intended to float or sell off the newly created shares. We want to explore all those matters in great detail in Committee.

The Secretary of State must think again. She believes that she has discovered a third way in investment in developing countries—a private sector that will be content with pursuing developmental objectives at a modest rate of return—and that, by calling it a public-private partnership, rather than a partial privatisation, she has cut the Gordian knot that prevented us from taking that step; but there is no such third way.

Mr. Leigh: The Government are retaining less of a share in the new company than the Conservative Government retained in a privatised British Telecom; and we retained a golden share for many years. I am also worried by the fact that, as the corporation is keeping 39 per cent. of its return on capital

employed—£468 million—it could be a target for predators. It will be a private company and there is nothing in the golden share to deter predatory interest.

Mr. Streeter: My hon. Friend makes an extremely important point. There are real concerns and fears. That is why I say that the enshrinement and entrenchment that the Secretary of State thinks that she has achieved may not be in place. That is why we need line-by-line scrutiny of the Bill. I warn the Minister that we will spend a long time in Committee. There is an awful lot to consider. I hope that the Secretary of State will be there, too, because decisions will have to be made. We intend to table sensible amendments that the Government will want to consider and, probably, accept.

My hon. Friend is right to say that this partial privatisation is extremely dangerous and could well hurt the very people whom the corporation was set up in 1948 to support. The way that the Secretary of State has chosen is self-deluding and potentially dangerous. I know that she does not like criticism, but I urge her to consider carefully what I have said. There are real dangers. I urge her to be flexible enough to allow the Bill to be strengthened in Committee.

No one could support private sector involvement more than Conservative Members, but we are not prepared to see 50 years of precious heritage sold off cheap and on false pretences. We will not stand by quietly and watch as the people of the developing world lose a vital lifeline to dignity and prosperity.

5.38 pm

Angela Smith (Basildon): I have listened with great interest to the debate this afternoon. It seems to me that the hon. Member for South–West Devon (Mr. Streeter) has missed some crucial and fundamental points. It is worth reminding the House that it was a Labour Government who established the Commonwealth Development Corporation in 1948. Then, as now, Labour Members recognised our wide responsibilities throughout the Commonwealth and the world. The object, which we will continue to stick to, is to invest in the world's poorest countries.

Since 1948, the corporation has become one of the world's leading providers of development finance. I am loth to cite statistics, as one can lose what is behind the figures, but it is worth noting that £1.6 billion is being invested in more than 400 enterprises in 54 countries. That is practical aid and support, especially for those smaller enterprises that would not attract major international finance.

We can note with interest some of the investments that have been made. I was surprised to learn that £4 million was invested in the largest poultry farmer in Nicaragua; £4 million in the Ugandan textile industry; and £13 million in the Philippines cement industry. Those investments would not have been gained from large international financial companies, but they are absolutely crucial to the companies and communities involved, bringing local sustainable development. The finance and support has gone to those countries that have the most underdeveloped private capital markets and the least capital. By contrast, the majority of private investment has gone straight to the wealthiest developing countries.

It is worth reminding the House of the statistics, although they cannot show the real pain that lies behind them. One in four people lives on less than $1 a day. The scale and depth of poverty cannot be conveyed by statistics. They do not convey the individual suffering and misery. When people can die from poverty, not just from starvation, we have an obligation to help those on the margins of life. Extra ethical investment can be of great help and, for some people, is a matter of life and death.

Both sides of the House can agree that we can be proud of the work that the CDC has undertaken. Given that success, any change would be viewed with caution. However, we have to seek ways to build on that success. Many of us believe that there should be more private investment in those areas of greatest need. The Bill and the new arrangements for the CDC can help to bring that about.

First, the Bill will enable the CDC to raise private sector capital to increase private investment in the poorest countries. In addition, it aims for long-term partnerships between the private and public sectors to bring about the sustainable development that is so crucial. Perhaps most importantly, it will also ensure that we use the CDC's commitment to ethical business practice to enhance ethical, social and environmental awareness and to encourage private investment to sign up to those concerns. Enhanced business investment is good if it helps poor people and if the social elements and environmental policy are good.

If the Bill is successful, it could be a model for other countries that want to work with private business to encourage ethical overseas investment. We have in the CDC a unique asset, with unique experience. We have a duty to use that and to do what we can to extend it. What distinguishes the CDC from other investments is its ethical stance, and I welcome the assurance from my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State today that that is foremost in her mind. The Bill could open up new opportunities for investment and development. More importantly, it will build on the important work that has already been undertaken. The CDC will use the experience of staff in offices in 27 countries to continue its work.

Today, we seek to improve and extend business investment by offering the support and advice of the CDC to target finance where the need is greatest. That is where the challenge lies—to ensure that the focus continues on the poorest countries and communities. Because of the success of the CDC, we should view any change with caution, but I welcome the Department's consultations and discussions with the NGOs. It is essential that they are involved because their expertise is key.

It may be a couple of years before market conditions are right for establishing the partnership. I ask my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State to consult widely on the composition of the board. Business and commercial interests are essential, but she will need to satisfy herself and those who have an interest in the partnership that the board and board members have the knowledge, experience and—especially—the commitment to undertake that vital role. It is also crucial that board reports should be available for scrutiny by Members of Parliament, because we will wish to review and examine the successes. Those will need to be open to public debate. Where the structure works well, other countries may follow. It is more difficult—but necessary in the interests

[Angela Smith]

of transparency and accountability—to allow Parliament the responsibility and the opportunity to review areas that may fail. We need to ensure that we can discuss those openly and to learn any lessons necessary. If we wish to use the partnership as a model, we must ensure that other countries also have the opportunity to learn from our mistakes as well as our successes.

I welcome the fact that the Government will hold the golden share. Unlike Conservative Members, I believe that to be crucial and I welcome the Government's commitment to it. Even when 100 per cent. of ordinary shares have been sold to the public, the Government will still have that golden share. It does not give voting rights, but it allows a member of the Government—preferably the Secretary of State—to attend meetings and to speak at them. That is important, as it ensures that development remains at the heart of the CDC and the reason for its existence. That will ensure that the Government's ethical policy remains in place.

I began by stating that a Labour Government established the CDC in 1948. The Bill changes the organisation but its provisions, if used effectively, will build on and develop the CDC's existing role, and bring more private investment to the very poor developing countries whose needs are the greatest.

5.45 pm

Dr. Jenny Tonge (Richmond Park): Liberal Democrat Members welcome the concept of the Commonwealth Development Corporation becoming a public-private partnership. We do not agree with the Conservatives that there is no middle way. Of course we do not: we believe that there has to be, or we would not be Liberal Democrats. The Bill offers the potential that more money and investment will go to developing countries. We appreciate that, although good development practice must emphasise education—especially for girls—and health issues, which must be accompanied by economic development.

I am a member of the Select Committee on International Development and, from the countries that I have visited and the Government officials to whom I have spoken, it is clear that there is a desperate need and desire for investment and development. However, I regret to say that, so desperate are they for growth in their economies, they tend to dismiss questions to do with the environment, labour standards or sustainability. I shall return to that later.

We have no objection to the concept of a public-private partnership in this context. We support it, provided that it really is the best way forward, and provided that the Government guarantee that it will not mean that, ultimately, there is less money in the development aid budget. If the public-private partnership fails—I shall express many reservations about it—will the Government ensure that the promised increase in funding for developing countries will continue and eventually reach 0.7 per cent. of gross domestic product?

The problems of the poorest countries are legion. They include bad governance—which is not helped by those countries' colonial past—environmental disasters, civil wars continuing and breaking out all the time, and the AIDS pandemic. In some areas, the disease affects up to 25 per cent. of the population and, sadly, many of those affected are the economically active. All those factors, and others, make investment in those countries risky and unattractive.

However, the past record of the CDC bears examination. We have heard a lot about the CDC's virtues from the hon. Member for South–West Devon (Mr. Streeter). The CDC has been able to take risks that the private sector could not take. Funded by Government loans, it has not had to achieve high financial returns: its target has been a three-year average return of 8 per cent, and it has been able to receive UK Government backing to access markets closed to private investors.

The Bill aims to ensure that the CDC will still be able to do its development work while at the same time attracting private capital, but will it succeed? I confess to being sceptical about the match between development objectives and the financial requirements of markets. My gut reaction is that it cannot work.

I was interested to read in today's newspapers that the chief executive of the Commonwealth Development Corporation is to leave the organisation. Either he thinks that the concept behind the Bill is brilliant but that he is not up to the task, or he thinks that it is lousy and he wants nothing to do with it.

Clare Short: The chief executive is a very fine man who strongly supports the Bill. We have worked closely together on the proposals. He is coming up to 60 and wants to be replaced before the transformation so that the organisation goes from strength to strength. He will do so in all honour and with the full agreement of the Government. There is no suggestion that he has any criticism of the Bill, nor that we have any criticism of him. It is a question of his age and of ensuring that the CDC is led by someone who can see it through its transformation period. I think that it is important to have that clarification on the record.

Dr. Tonge: I am delighted to hear that, and glad that the Secretary of State has had an opportunity to say so. None the less, I share many of the reservations expressed by the hon. Member for South–West Devon.

I must confess that I have no experience of investment or the workings of the City. My lifetime investment has been in my children and in working for the national health service, a very public company, though perhaps not, I suspect, for much longer. Nevertheless, I have considerable reservations. The International Development Committee was told that private investors are interested in ethical investment. We were also told, conversely, that the companies looking to sustainable development in low-income countries are few and far between. The ethical investment market currently amounts to £2 billion per annum, a tiny proportion of the entire market.

The CDC's returns in 1998 showed a loss of 3.4 per cent. compared with a modest Government growth target of 8 per cent. The CDC is not currently required to pay any interest on loans. In future, the CDC will aim at an overall rate of return of 15 per cent. in order to attract private investors. I simply cannot see how that can be achieved without compromising the purposes of the CDC.

We were told that there have been special factors recently in India and Pakistan, in which the CDC has experienced huge difficulties that affected the rate of

return. Emerging markets have been turbulent, but there will always be countries in difficulties. The areas that really require CDC attention, such as sub-Saharan Africa and south Asia, have far more serious problems than those of India and Pakistan, and conditions there are much more turbulent. Those are the countries most in need, and I am sceptical that the project will benefit the poorest of the world.

We have heard something about taxation, and I shall not—indeed, given my background, I could not—go into it in great depth. However, the Bill is only half a Bill as the detailed tax proposals have not been put before us. No doubt, greater business minds than mine will tackle the tax proposals in Committee, but I feel that it insults the House to fail to table those proposals with the Bill.

The Secretary of State said that an offshore banking arrangement would be unacceptable. She previously told the Select Committee that such an arrangement would be intolerable. Tailored tax arrangements have been announced to put the CDC in a special category. How fair will that be for other companies that trade ethically? We must see the detail. I am unconvinced that the CDC can be a one-off case in a special taxation category, and I hope that the muddle can be sorted out satisfactorily in Committee.

The CDC sent the Select Committee a copy of its business principles before the Bill reached Second Reading, and they are laudable. The CDC aims to implement the best ethical practices itself and in all subsidiary companies that work for it. It will exhibit "honesty, integrity and fairness." It will employ good environmental, health and safety, and social issues policies. However, the document is full of verbs such as "recognise", "seek" and "identify". I should prefer it to contain words and phrases such as "insist", "enforce" and "make legally binding". The document reminds me of the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development code of conduct for multinational enterprises, which is advisory and full of hope but which contains no compulsion. We have heard it all before, during the negotiations on the multilateral agreement on investment.

We all know that multinationals—unlike the hon. Member for South–West Devon, I shall name no names—produce glossy brochures containing codes of conduct. Sadly, we also know that the companies do not always adhere to them. We understand that the Governments of poorer countries are responsible for ensuring the protection of their environment and the welfare of their people. However, they are desperate for investment and industrialisation and they are tempted to turn a blind eye to bad practice. The CDC must not be allowed to follow that path.

The so-called golden share, held by the Government, is claimed to be the mechanism by which CDC investments will be reviewed and monitored. Will it ensure a legally binding adherence to the business principles set down by the CDC, and will that cover any subsidiary companies? Or will a thin veil be drawn over that aspect of CDC business so that investors can be attracted?

My final concern is the percentage of CDC business that will be done in the very poorest countries, such as those in sub-Saharan Africa and south Asia. What percentage will be done in countries in which a larger return on investment can be assured? The Government require that at least 70 per cent. of investment should be in poorer countries. That is fine, and we have heard today which countries are the poorest.

The Government also require that the CDC should aim at 50 per cent. investment in sub-Saharan Africa and south Asia, where the poorest people of the world live, but if the Government wish to stick to their White Paper's excellent aspirations, which we all support, they must not "aim" but insist that those countries receive 50 per cent. of the investment. Furthermore, they must insist that that investment helps the poorest of those countries, not lining the pockets of the wealthy and corrupt.

If the Government insist on those things, will the CDC be able, given all the problems in those countries, to attract sufficient private investment that will provide a good return for shareholders? I fear that it will not. A memorandum to the Select Committee from Sir Michael McWilliam, a former member of the CDC board, pointed out that

"the CDC should be made to satisfy two masters—the God of the Development Community and the Mammon in the City."

It remains to be seen whether the CDC can deliver.

The Liberal Democrats will not vote against Second Reading, but we hope that problems will be addressed and resolved in Committee. Unless they are, the Government will not achieve their noble purpose of seeking to alleviate poverty in the world.

5.58 pm

Dr. Doug Naysmith (Bristol, North–West): Thank you, Mr. Deputy Speaker, for allowing me to make a few remarks in this important debate. I do so with a little trepidation, because I feel very much an amateur in this area, and I know that most hon. Members present have much more experience of development matters than I do. Nevertheless, as a long-time member of the World Development Movement and a supporter of other charities and pressure groups that aim to redress the clear imbalance between the richer, mostly western nations and the poorer, developing countries, I welcome the Bill. In particular, I welcome the safeguards outlined today by my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State.

The Bill has benefited from the scrutiny that it received before it came to Second Reading. It started life in the other place, and it has been well aired in the Select Committee on International Development. The Government have promised that that type of pre-legislative process will become more common. Apart from the Financial Services and Markets Bill, the Immigration and Asylum Bill and the draft Food Standards Bill, the process has not yet become the norm. I look forward to the process happening more frequently in future, and I welcome today's publication of a draft Freedom of Information Bill.

I support the Bill, which will convert the CDC into a plc with a difference. The public-private partnership and the ability to attract private sector funds into parts that other public limited companies cannot—or will not—reach will be important. However, the difference that an ethical dimension will build into the whole project is even more important.

From reading the transcripts of previous debates and evidence sessions in Committee, it is obvious that the CDC is already a well-respected vehicle, which has

[Dr. Doug Naysmith]

supported much high-quality development work—at present, about 400 projects in 50-plus countries. It is also obvious that many people who know a lot about these matters feel that much more can be achieved if private sector investment can be levered in where it is wanted and needed. The CDC has not been able to support as much potential development as it could have, at least partly because of Government financial rules and the limits on Government expenditure and because, unfortunately, direct state involvement can sometimes be a disincentive to prospective private partners.

It is clearly the case, however, that the Government's known commitment and explicit priorities for development help to establish trust. Much of the CDC's success has come from its close ties with the British Government. Therefore, the loosening of those ties must be undertaken with care.

Probably the most important feature of current CDC projects is that a high proportion of them—as high as 80 per cent., and a mixture of equity and loans—are in the poorest developing countries, which are those with a per capita gross national product of less than $1,600 or thereabouts. Certainly that should continue to be the case, and it has been mentioned in virtually every speech today. The eradication of poverty must continue to be the aim.

Existing policies try to ensure that supported projects are economically and commercially viable, sound in development terms and satisfactory when judged as ethical businesses. Christian Aid has advocated social and environmental impact assessments before investment decisions are taken, and independent monitoring of codes of conduct for ethical businesses in each country.

If it can be shown that private investors can achieve attractive returns in the markets of the poorest countries without exploitation, it will be of great value. Christian Aid has also welcomed the Government's decision that proceeds from the sale of holdings in the CDC should be used to boost the aid budget. That should certainly happen, with the proviso—unnecessary, I hope—that they are an addition to an increasing aid budget and not a substitute for part of it.

The Government have already done much and they intend to do more to protect the CDC's development role, particularly during its transition into its new form. Despite the strictures of the hon. Member for South–West Devon (Mr. Streeter), many non-governmental organisations already believe that there are sufficient protections.

The concern now must be that the CDC must become sufficiently attractive to investors so that it can run successfully as a business. Judging by the story in last Friday's *Financial Times*, it may yet be some time before the CDC's investment portfolio is in shape to attract private sector investment, but the Secretary of State has explained the background to that story. Nevertheless, the aim must be to complete the legislation and put the change in place as soon as possible, so that there is no delay when the time is right to set up this public-private partnership.

I support the Bill and wish the CDC every success in its new form.

6.3 pm

Mr. Bowen Wells (Hertford and Stortford): The hon. Member for Bristol, North–West (Dr. Naysmith) anticipated how I intended to open my remarks by describing the two reports of the Select Committee on International Development on the subject as a pre-legislative process. One of the few recommendations of the Committee that the Secretary of State has not been able to honour—it is not her fault, but that of the organisers of Government business—is the recommendation that the Bill be the subject of a pre-legislative process. We have done our best to take evidence on the subject and we published it in two reports, the last of which was published about a month ago. I hope that the House has found that useful.

As the hon. Member for Richmond Park (Dr. Tonge) explained, that report contains much of the detail that the Secretary of State proposes in the Bill. Indeed, I would say from the outset that the objective of the Bill is one that we would all wholeheartedly embrace. The Government are attempting to expand the Commonwealth Development Corporation so that it can take on more business and expand the private sector into some of the more difficult countries of the world and act as a catalyst to bring in other private sector investors and local investors to enhance the private sector in those countries.

As the White Paper, which the Secretary of State introduced, straightforwardly states, development will take place not simply through aid, but through the private sector—through which there has been a much larger flow of funds to developing countries than that from the aid budget, even given the increase that the right hon. Lady managed to secure from the Treasury. I thoroughly congratulate her on that, but it will not be a fraction of what we could and should anticipate coming from the private sector.

The Bill, which will enable the CDC to be used as a vehicle for private sector investment, is to be wholly welcomed. We must also welcome the fact that the CDC in its new form will bring more and not less money to the countries involved, in particular the poorest countries in which it is difficult for the private sector to operate.

The devil is in the detail in this Bill, as the Select Committee said. The Secretary of State has managed to answer most of our questions about documentation—the publication of the articles and the memorandum of association, and the details of the special share and the development policy to be followed. We have been able to examine those in detail. Indeed, we know the business principles and ethical investment policy that the CDC will pursue. Together, those present a considerable burden and onus on the CDC, which might act as a detriment to attracting sufficient private investment, although I hope that they will not.

I shall recall some of the achievements of the CDC for hon. Members because those will inform the House about how it will have to change when it is in its new form. There are some worries. As the House knows, I had the honour and privilege of serving the CDC as an employee for nearly 15 years. In that time, we undertook many developments, many of which were highly successful. As the hon. Member for Bristol, North–West remarked, they relied on the relationship with the Government. Low-interest loans received from the Government enabled the CDC to carry out the work. The Government thought that the CDC filled a special niche, as was set out in the Bill that set it up in 1948. It was not to be a competitor with other private investors; it was to fill a niche where private investors could not or would not dare to tread.

One of the CDC's early investments was in Swaziland. The then King of the Swazis negotiated with the CDC a long lease on large tracts of hillside that had been denuded of all vegetation. The CDC found that the Caribbean pine tree—which agriculturalists had located in Belize—would grow well on the high plateau lands of Swaziland. It invested in clothing the hills with a large forest, which took about 13 to 15 years to mature—because of the conditions in Swaziland, the trees grew faster than they do in the Caribbean. The forest gave rise to an industry in wood products, which still flourishes today, and a mill to produce pulp for paper was founded in the country as a result. The partnership between the King of the Swazis and the CDC has greatly promoted the Swaziland economy, not only by creating a new forest and paper products industry, but by major investment in sugar through the Swaziland irrigation scheme. That has been a huge success and a training farm is based there that helps many African and other agriculturalists to learn the latest techniques in tropical African agriculture. That improves yields and people's ability to feed themselves and to produce cash crops to sell worldwide.

That is the sort of thing that can be done with long-term loans that do not require dividends or returns on capital for 15 years while the trees grow. Another investment was required in the factory that produces the pulp, and a further one in a railway line from Swaziland to ports in South Africa and Mozambique to allow export of products to South African or overseas paper producers. A private investor would be loth to undertake such a scheme because of the time taken for the investment to reach maturity. It was that niche that the CDC filled so brilliantly in that example.

Another example from Africa is the CDC's investment in Kenya in the production of coffee and tea by smallholders. Those products now head the lists of Kenyan exports. That resulted from a land reform achieved by a former chairman of the CDC and Governor of Kenya, Sir Evelyn Baring. With the co-operation of the people around Nairobi, he reorganised landholdings to bring together sufficient acreage of farmland to enable people to grow coffee and provide a farm for themselves to sustain their families and produce surpluses to sell in the market. Co-operative tea and coffee factories were set up and have been a huge success.

The only worrying thing is that the theory that people produce fewer children as they get richer has proved mistaken in this case, because they have become more productive in that respect as well as in tea and coffee. Economically, and in terms of producing independent people who can vote, pay tax and participate in their country's democracy and civil society, the project has been a huge success. Again, the success was due to the sort of finance provided by the CDC. Organising smallholders is not the most profitable activity in developing countries, but that was what the CDC did in producing first-class development.

Clare Short: I pay tribute to the hon. Gentleman and his colleagues for their valuable work. If the poorest countries cannot attract investment on terms other than those that he describes, is not the future gloomy? If it is not possible to find beneficial, commercially interesting investments in those countries, they will be marginalised from the world economy. The south-east Asian countries, which have had the biggest reduction of poverty in the past 50 years, received aid to invest in education and health, but they created conditions that attracted large-scale private investment. That is what caused the major advance. I respect his argument, but it worries me. If the CDC cannot make the transition that we seek, the prognosis for the economies of the poorer countries is gloomy.

Mr. Wells: I could not agree more. I am describing the role that the CDC played in initiating development where previously it was not happening. That has led to other, greater development. In Malaysia, the CDC pioneered the diversification of the economy from simple dependence on rubber plantations into palm oil, which is now its second or third largest export. Once diversified, the economy was less dependent on one product. Both industries generated funds that attracted further investment to process the rubber and palm oil. That provided the revenue for the Government to increase investment in health and education. Malaya's economy is now described as a tiger.

Countries have to move to the bigger league, if I can call it that, to allow real investment—the private flows from which Malaysia has benefited so hugely that it produces motor cars and exports them to this country. The CDC has not taken part in those much more profitable and normal investments. I shall not take too much more time wallowing in past successes. What the Secretary of State is trying to achieve needs to be achieved, but it will come at the sacrifice of some of what the CDC was able to do in the past.

On handling finance, the need to locate the CDC offshore and shield some of its investments from exchange risks is shown by the housing market. CDC investment in housing has diminished over the years, because if pounds are used for long-term investments in housing mortgages, the money has to be returned to pounds from the local currency 20 years later when that currency may have been considerably devalued. That not only affects the interest repaid on the loan, but means that the money is repaid in, for example, devalued Guyana dollars. I was involved in housing mortgage finance in Guyana; a factor of 60 times what the money was worth when it was invested is involved. In purely financial terms, housing was a bad investment.

The new CDC structure may allow it both to borrow Guyana dollars and avoid the exchange rate risks. If that is tax free, it will not be taxed in Guyana or the United Kingdom, so it can roll over. I hope that the CDC will be able to undertake such investment, which will enable it to contribute to a valuable and profitable housing market, alongside other investors. Throughout Africa and Asia, there is a huge need for extra housing development. Social housing is also needed, but such investment will help with that because building housing for people who can afford to buy it means that people who cannot will be able to move into the houses vacated by the buyers. There are many opportunities of a different character. As I have shown, we are changing the character of the CDC profoundly by altering its financial arrangements and putting it largely into the financial sector.

The CDC executive was told that it should not engage in refinancing. If some company or group was willing to make an investment in a power or hotel company, the CDC would not invest. It would say, "If you think it is viable and you can make your money out of it in the

[Mr. Wells]

private sector, you go ahead; the CDC will not bother." However, in the small Caribbean islands, the CDC was the first investor in international tourism. In St. Lucia, Antigua and Grenada, the first international-style hotels were built by the CDC and completed in 1962. That was the foundation of tourism in that area.

The then chairman of the CDC, Sir Nutcombe Hume, said that he would never invest in international tourism because that was not what development was about. However, he did so because no one else would invest in those hotels. That started a huge new industry. Indeed, in terms of earning power, tourism is the only viable and buoyant industry in Antigua, Grenada, St. Lucia and Barbados. The CDC was an initiator of such investment; it took a highly developmental role, of which we can all be proud. The Labour Government who set up the CDC, successive Governments and all those people employed in the CDC have worked hard to bring that about.

Members of the executive of the CDC were not interested in investing in equity; they were told not to do so. Now, the reverse will take place—it is already beginning. The reason for not going into such investment was that it was much more risky. There is a banking principle that one does not use loans—with which the CDC was financed—to invest in equity, with all the attendant dangers: when the money would be repaid; when the dividend would be received; or whether the dividend would be enough to repay the loan and the interest in due time. That will change, and so the character of the CDC will be greatly changed.

That change could make the CDC more, rather than less, viable, provided that we get right those details to which the Secretary of State referred in her introductory remarks. The question of tax is absolutely crucial. We shall have to go into that matter in Committee, and examine exactly how it will apply. According to my notes, we were talking about exemption from capital gains tax and chargeable gains. That matter needs further exploration in Committee, to ensure that the CDC is not put at a disadvantage when investing alongside other private sector companies, which will be keeping their money offshore. Such companies would not be taxed in this country and would be able to recycle their money and reinvest it overseas without having to bear the tax that the CDC would have to pay if it did not have that tax exemption. If we put the CDC into that position, it would be unable to invest alongside other private sector investors, which is one of the Secretary of State's major objectives, and one that I very much welcome. The CDC should be involved in such investment, not only in partnership with other international lenders, but by gathering together and harnessing capital in the countries themselves. It should be working alongside those countries, both in investment and in management.

I hope that one of the features of the existing CDC that will be retained is the capacity for investors to manage their own investments. In the many difficult political circumstances and in the potentially unstable economic conditions of the least developed world, that is probably the only real security for investors. If they manage the project or are responsible for its management and can decide who to recruit and appoint, there will be a degree of security that cannot be provided in any other way. In so doing, they will be giving an example to local people as to how to manage properly and efficiently. They will be able to train local people as managers. That would be one of the most effective developmental strategies that we could undertake. I hope that we shall encourage the CDC to continue to manage projects overseas, albeit with an equal opportunities programme to bring in women. People from the country concerned and from other countries should be involved and moved around, as the CDC has begun to do. It should do that even more and should carry out appropriate training.

Clare Short: As the hon. Gentleman will know, the Department has a holding in the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development. The bank's chief economist, Nick Stern, thinks that the move from loans to equity and, therefore, the greater commitment to improving the quality of the management of the business, rather than securing a return on the loan, will possibly have great creative impact. The reason for that move is not merely to obtain a higher rate of return that will make it attractive to commercial investment; it will improve the long-term management capacity of the company into which the equity is placed. That potential benefit of the change could have great importance.

Mr. Wells: I very much agree with that point. I want the CDC to be encouraged by the directors in actually pursuing that. However, the change will not be easy to achieve. The right people must be found; they must be properly trained and supervised. However, doing so will provide security and that vital interest in the day-to-day management and in taught management. That would make it impossible for Governments in the states in which the CDC was operating to make political appointments to the management—a problem that has faced the CDC in the past. Such political appointees were not able to manage properly; they had neither the training nor the background and were forced into the management of the company. Thereby hangs a serious tale, which, in the case of the Guyana Electricity Corporation, ended with the collapse of the company, so that, for some months, there was no light in Guyana's capital city. Management is most important and I hope that it will be developed systematically, using modern management techniques.

I come now to the question of borrowing. The CDC will be able to expand if it reaches the point at which it can borrow on the international markets. Until now, its great restriction has been that it was subject to the constraints of the public sector borrowing requirement and the amount that could be borrowed in the private sector. Once money from the aid budget was not being invested in the CDC, its ability to expand was dependent on borrowing from the Treasury. It will be released from that constraint by the Bill, once the shares are sold to the private sector. I understand that the Treasury rules provide that the Government should sell 60 per cent. of the shares to private sector investors and the CDC would then be able to borrow on the private markets. That goal must be reached as soon as is practical, because it is from that borrowing that the CDC will be able to expand.

My next point relates to timing. If we were to turn the CDC into a company under the Companies Act 1985, but wholly owned by the Government—as it would be

possible and practical to do by the end of this year—the CDC would be unable to borrow from the private sector because its shares would be wholly owned by the Government. In those circumstances, I worry as to whether the CDC could maintain its investment programme—roughly running at about £250 million a year—because its only source of money would be self-generated funds, unless the Department is considering allowing the CDC to borrow from the Treasury during that interim period. I suppose that that would be possible, but perhaps the Under-Secretary of State could let us know about that when he sums up. Will he also confirm whether some of the aid budget will be allocated to the CDC to enable it to expand its lending and investment programmes during the interim period before the shares are sold off and it can borrow in the private sector?

That period is crucial because the CDC will be attempting to build a track record during those years. If its ability to borrow and expand is constrained too much, there will a bad effect on the track record that it presents to private investors.

My own view is that the sooner we sell the shares and launch the CDC in its private-public sector role, the better, which brings me to the balance sheet. Waiting too long for a track record would be a mistake; the CDC should go quickly into the private sector, so that it can begin to borrow, to adjust to the disciplines of the private sector and to make the equity investments necessary to enable it to accomplish what the Secretary of State wants. Certain interim steps could be taken—for example, dressing up the balance sheet by issuing preference shares. Such shares would have a coupon of, say, 8 per cent. They would attract ethical investors and commercial investors from the insurance world who are interested in an emerging market portfolio. They would also have transfer rights, so that they could be transferred into proper, full equity share at a later date to be decided by the investor. In that way, we could attract private sector investment into the CDC sooner.

Whether the preference shareholding would qualify the CDC to borrow from the private sector is a detail that we need to explore, but that sort of imaginative thinking has to go into the balance sheet and how to dress that up in the interim period. There is no doubt that it would be perfectly possible to produce a balance sheet for the CDC that would be attractive to the private sector almost immediately, because the CDC has accumulated profits and surpluses within the budget totalling almost £550 million. In addition, there are Government loans that are not currently being repaid, or on which interest is not being paid, which could be converted into equity.

Those are major hurdles which the CDC must overcome as it transfers to its new role of investing in vibrant sectors of society. In its developmental role, it will help countries to escape dependency and enable them to achieve self-confident development. As those countries generate their own resources, they will be able to invest revenues derived from the taxation of those resources in housing, education and health, which are vital to proper development.

I shall conclude with a statement made by Sir Michael McWilliam to the Select Committee. I asked:

> "Can the CDC achieve its aims of development more effectively if this Bill goes through? What do the panel think, yes or no?"

Sir Michael's conclusion was:

> "I think the end result as one comes out of this transition period will be more focused development, a clearer idea of where they really are making a contribution and the ability to attract partner funds will also be enhanced and that again will reinforce their development purpose. I think this whole process, uncomfortable as it may be and muddly as it may be in some respects, has a very worthwhile objective at the end of the road."

It is a worthwhile objective to find a way of enhancing, encompassing and bringing together private sector investment in the extremely poor and not-so-poor countries of the third world, so as to bring about economic development that complements social and other development.

6.34 pm

Mr. Phil Hope (Corby): I shall be brief and stay within the time allowed to me.

I strongly support the Bill because it gives us an opportunity to pursue the White Paper's goals and objectives of eliminating world poverty. The hon. Member for South-West Devon (Mr. Streeter) said, revealingly, that the Conservatives did not privatise the CDC because it would hurt the poorest of the poor. What does that tell us about the Conservatives' motives in all their other privatisations?

I am convinced that the Bill is about long-term partnership, as the CDC attracts new private capital for investment in the public good in developing countries. The CDC will target and expand its work in the poorest countries and will ensure that its investment is ethical, with social, environmental and health and safety issues taken into account. I remind the House that, in October 1997, when launching the White Paper, my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister said of the sale of the CDC:

> "I can also promise that all the money Government raises from the sale will be ploughed back into our development programme".

That is an important point.

The White Paper's goal of halving the number of people living in extreme poverty by 2015 is extremely important. Achieving that goal is not just about aid, or trade, or development support; it is about investment. My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State made it clear that we have to get private sector investment into developing countries. The ambitious programme that the Government have set out will turn the CDC into a major instrument in the achievement of that goal, and I hope that this will become a model that all other countries will follow. In that way, developing countries will be able to go forward with us and achieve the elimination of global poverty.

6.36 pm

Mr. Edward Leigh (Gainsborough): One of the key reasons why I take an interest in this subject is that, when we were at the Department of Trade and Industry, Sir Tim Sainsbury and I were involved in the successful privatisation of the Export Credits Guarantee Department. That company is not entirely dissimilar from the CDC, even though, because we were dealing with potentially far more prosperous markets, we faced far fewer problems when the ECGD was privatised than the Government are facing today. The then Labour Opposition opposed that privatisation, but we rejoice when sinners repent of their former mistakes.

[Mr. Edward Leigh]

I have a few questions to ask the Government—after all, the CDC was founded in 1948 and it has been successful, so we have to be certain that the motives and factors prompting change are powerful. The CDC borrows long, at 25 years, and lends short, at an average of seven years; that adds to its surpluses. How will being in the private sector facilitate its ability to continue to do so? If the CDC's current borrowing power is insufficient, and if it will have more freedoms in the private sector, will it be able to borrow as cheaply in the private sector as it borrows now? Since 1995, the corporation has borrowed from the Exchequer at a zero rate of interest. Can that continue when the CDC is in the private sector?

Can the Treasury concede a special tax structure to a private company, to enable that new private company to compete with offshore companies? Will not that set a precedent, which the Treasury normally resists vigorously? The CDC is an extremely small burden on the UK taxpayer, so why are we changing its status now? If we are doing so because of its insufficient borrowing powers, could not those powers be extended in some other way—for example, by allowing the CDC to borrow overseas, which would free it from the shackles of the public sector borrowing requirement?

As I said in an earlier intervention, I understand that the CDC's reserves at 31 December 1997 stood at £486 million—some 39 per cent. of its capital employed. My concern is that the CDC will be a target for predators who are more interested in its reserves than in its work. The Secretary of State is completely committed to her subject and I do not for one moment question her good faith in this matter; I do, however, question the ability of the new company that she is creating to resist predators once it leaves her control.

That is all important, because 80 per cent. of the CDC's investments are in countries whose per capita income is less than $1,600. I have no doubt that the new CDC will continue to invest in those very poor countries, but, like my hon. Friend the Member for South-West Devon (Mr. Streeter), I am not convinced that, once it is in the private sector, it will not concentrate its investments in such countries in the better, more fruitful and more commercially viable investments that are already the subject of private sector interest.

Clare Short: That is a very important point. We do not want the CDC or its successor to make unprofitable, second-rate investments. High-return, high-tech investments are not taking place in the poorest countries, but they want and need that investment. If the CDC were to move into sectors with high rates of return and help to lever that kind of investment to some of the poorest countries in the world, that would be extremely beneficial to those countries' economies. It would not be a bad thing.

Mr. Leigh: The right hon. Lady is absolutely correct. However, my point follows on from the excellent speech made by my hon. Friend the Member for Hertford and Stortford (Mr. Wells). He brings great experience to this debate and gave a string of examples—which included hotels in Antigua—where the CDC, under its current structure, had led the way by investing in projects that were not initially attractive to the private sector. I have no doubt that the right hon. Lady is correct: it is right and proper that the CDC should be able to make more profitable, high-tech investments. However, we are concerned that the private sector is already doing that. We are not convinced that, once freed from Government control, the new CDC will not forget its roots, which are so important to the developing world.

The CDC's return on capital employed fell from 8.3 per cent. in 1996 to 7.3 per cent. in 1997. How will private partners be attracted in such an atmosphere? The Government admitted that there was a problem in their evidence to the Select Committee when they said that returns at that level would "not be sufficient". Will socially desirable projects be sacrificed in order to increase returns? The Prime Minister said:

> "I am less interested in whether an institution is public or private than whether it works."

We all agree with that. However, what proof do we have that the CDC will work better as a public-private institution—apart from vague exhortations about the merits of the "third way"? Is this project a sacrifice to the ideology of the third way?

What proof do the Government have that the CDC could not continue its work in its current form? Could it not be allowed to borrow overseas? In any event, is this project not a privatisation in all but name? If it is, why not admit it? What is the point in obtaining a substantial minority shareholding? If the golden share is retained, is not the substantial minority shareholding of 25 per cent. superfluous? The Government will sell what the CDC owes it as shares, but will the new shareholders want to continue to invest in future projects of the type that we have described? Will they set new priorities?

I believe that the CDC as we know it and have come to admire it is being sacrificed on the altar of the third way. The third-way mantra is that the public and private sectors can inevitably run companies together. The Post Office will be the next victim of the third-way ideology—although that will be an even more timid toe in the water because the political complexities are far greater: in that instance, it will be our constituents complaining, not some of the poorest people in the world.

I have a different third way. I believe that there are several wrong approaches to international development. One wrong approach is to wash one's hands of it and say that people in the developing world are none of our concern. All hon. Members are passionately concerned about poor countries and want to help them. Another clearly wrong method is the woolly-headed, generous approach, unrelated to market disciplines, which has proved disastrous in many countries. I do believe in the third way: a hard-headed, market-disciplined approach. If the company achieves that, well and good; but why not at least have the courage to admit that this is a full-scale privatisation? If it is, I suspect that some of the poorest people in the world may suffer, and that we may have to create a new Commonwealth Development Corporation in the future.

6.45 pm

Mrs. Cheryl Gillan (Chesham and Amersham): This has been an interesting and full debate about the Commonwealth Development Corporation, which has been operating since 1948. In a way, I suppose that we have been considering what it will do in the next

millennium. I join hon. Members on both sides of the House—not least my hon. Friend the Member for South-West Devon (Mr. Streeter), who opened so ably for the Opposition—in paying tribute to the corporation for the way in which it has discharged its aims and objectives since its inception.

We welcome this opportunity to examine the organisation's forward planning. I stress to the Secretary of State that the Opposition's motives are as good as her own: we have no vested interest in seeking the failure of any privatisation or public-private partnership—whatever the right hon. Lady wishes to call this measure. I hope that she will consider my remarks in that spirit. However, the process is not without its difficulties—not least of which is the U-turn that the Labour party has made on this issue.

"The Opposition are supportive of the corporation's contribution. It is a public corporation and it will remain even more so under the next Labour Government."—[*Official Report*, 20 May 1996; Vol. 278, c. 65.]

Those are the words not of some left-wing fanatic but of the Under-Secretary.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for International Development (Mr. George Foulkes): Who says that I am not a left-wing fanatic?

Mrs. Gillan: If the cap fits, wear it. The Under-Secretary is responsible for steering the Bill through the House, and perhaps the fact that his heart is not in it has contributed to the delay in the passage of this measure.

It has taken a remarkably long time to bring the Bill to the Floor of the House considering that it began its passage through the legislative process on 7 December last year when it received a Second Reading in another place. From its First Reading in this place on 10 March, it has taken two and a half months to reach this stage today—although that is not as long as the Foreign Secretary takes to answer some written questions. The hold-ups in the passage of the Bill are indicative of the problems attached to it.

Unfortunately, the Bill's passage has coincided with the CDC's announcement that it made a £42 million loss in 1998—its first annual deficit since 1954. That is hardly a helpful result considering the Government's plans for its future. The Bill has at last reached the House and we have had a chance to listen to hon. Members' views about the proposals and the so-called public-private partnership, which is privatisation by another name—as my hon. Friend the Member for New Forest, West (Mr. Swayne) pointed out in an intervention during the Secretary of State's speech.

We know that the legislation gives rise to some difficulties. That is recognised not least by the Department, which has been wrestling with the problems highlighted in another place, in the Select Committee and in today's debate. The key is in the Secretary of State's speech. The Secretary of State was honest enough to say that she had struggled with this issue and that she believed that she had found the solution. I hope that she has—sadly, only time will tell—but it is only right that we should have an opportunity to raise with her our fears and trepidations and examine the problems that we believe the CDC may face as she takes it down this route. The Secretary of State referred to tailored tax treatment. However, as many of my hon. Friends have pointed out, we have not had an opportunity to examine the details of that tailored tax treatment, which will not be available until the Committee stage.

The Secretary of State talked about the problems of the timing of the listing and the CDC's financial record. When I asked her about future profitability, she said that she was no Mystic Meg, but she went on to read from her script that the CDC's profitability will increase.

Clare Short: The hon. Lady claims to wish the CDC well, so she should not make irresponsible remarks. Everybody in the world knows that emerging markets have faced difficulties this year, and any responsible decision to float the CDC on the stock market will therefore take into account the state of emerging markets and the likely interest in investing in the company. The hon. Lady's colleague the hon. Member for Hertford and Stortford (Mr. Wells) made constructive points about making sure that the balance sheet can perform well in the meantime.

There is a gap between making responsible criticism, and denouncing the whole operation and trying to score points that would reduce the possibility of the project having the most beneficial future. It is unnecessary to descend into cheap point scoring instead of tackling a complex and interesting transition.

Mrs. Gillan: That intervention does not do the Secretary of State justice; it is unworthy of her. She represents a party that talked down every privatisation carried out by Conservative Governments. Nothing in my remarks so far has been other than the truth, and I am trying to be constructive. I said at the beginning of my speech that I hoped that the Secretary of State would respond to that, but obviously that will not be the case.

There has been much praise of the CDC on both sides of the House. The hon. Member for Basildon (Angela Smith) said that she wanted the CDC's focus to remain on the poorest countries, and she wanted wider consultation with non-governmental organisations, which we can all applaud. However, the language that the hon. Lady used gave the impression that she believes that the Government will retain total control of the CDC. The hon. Member for Richmond Park (Dr. Tonge), in her rush to support the third way, almost forgot that she intended to be critical of the Bill. She seemed to welcome the Bill and then said that it would not work. She is trying to be all things to all people, but I agree with the scepticism that she expressed later in her contribution.

The hon. Member for Bristol, North-West (Dr. Naysmith) welcomed the draft Bill on freedom of information, and there are so many unknown quantities in this Bill that I tend to agree with him that we need more freedom of information, perhaps to know the details on which we are legislating today. If ever a Bill needed a pre-legislative process, it is this Bill, which contains so many unknown quantities that we shall not know what we are talking about until the Department for International Development chooses to reveal the details.

[Mrs. Gillan]

My hon. Friend the Member for Hertford and Stortford (Mr. Wells), the Chairman of the Select Committee on International Development—

Mr. Streeter: The distinguished Chairman.

Mrs. Gillan: Indeed, as my hon. Friend says, he is the distinguished Chairman of that Committee. My hon. Friend the Member for Hertford and Stortford, who has already made such a great contribution to the Bill's passage, acknowledged that the devil is in the detail, and went on to prove his command of the detail of the Bill. I hope that, in Committee, Ministers will prove that they have as much command of the detail as my hon. Friend does.

In a brief contribution, the hon. Member for Corby (Mr. Hope) said that he hoped that the Bill would be the model for all to follow. I hope so too, but unless questions are answered, that will not be the case.

My hon. Friend the Member for Gainsborough (Mr. Leigh) reflected Conservative Members' concerns about whether the new CDC will be a target for predators. I hope that the Under-Secretary will address that issue in his winding-up speech.

There is a problem with the Bill. Privatisation was very close to our hearts when we were in government, and if it had been possible, we would have moved towards privatising the CDC in the belief that we could have improved its lot in the world. We judged that it was not possible, and that has been reflected in the proceedings to date. When the Bill passed through the upper House, there was a feeling of consensus, but when one reads the debate, one realises that it was mainly due to the fact that the CDC commands such affection, and its work such respect. There was consensus about its contribution to the development of poorer countries, but there was disquiet about the incompleteness and inadequacy of the Government's plans. The same concerns have been expressed today.

When my hon. Friend the Member for South–West Devon opened for the Opposition, he said that we would not seek to divide the House on Second Reading. I agree with him, and we shall not seek a Division. Let me instead reiterate for the Minister the detailed matters that we hope to explore. My hon. Friend described four of those in his speech.

First, have the CDC's developmental principles been adequately protected, or will the Bill destroy its great heritage? That question has come from all sides in this debate. Will the Department's budget receive a fair price for our taxpayers' investment during the past 50 years? I hope that the Minister will answer that question. Will the privatisation protect the poorest people in the developing world? They are the very people whom the organisation was set up to help, and we do not want there to be any diminution in that help. Do the Government's proposals for the tax treatment of the new CDC deserve our support? I presume that the Minister will be able to say little about that tonight because we will have to wait until nearer the Committee stage for the detailed measures to emerge.

I hope that the Under-Secretary understands our deep-seated concerns. The process of reforming the CDC started in October 1997, and 19 months later, we are left with unanswered questions, unpublished documents and no direction or guidance on certain key aspects of the Bill. That has been reflected in debates in the other place and on the Floor of this House and in two reports by the Select Committee. I hope that the Minister will be able to answer some of our detailed questions tonight. If not, I hope that he will be able to give us the answers in Committee. We shall reserve until Third Reading our judgment on whether he has succeeded, and we may feel that we have to vote against the Bill because of the concerns articulated today which the Government have not yet addressed.

Like other hon. Members on all sides of the House, I wish the Bill well in the next stage of its proceedings, but I want the Minister to ensure that he responds to all our questions and concerns. The CDC deserves that.

6.57 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for International Development (Mr. George Foulkes): We have had a predominantly thoughtful debate on the policy and principles behind the Government's proposal to establish a public-private partnership for the CDC, which, as my hon. Friend the Member for Basildon (Angela Smith) said, was set up by a Labour Government in 1948.

There was an interesting contrast between the petty, carping, negative tones of the principal Opposition spokesmen and the constructive, helpful welcome for the Bill by the knowledgeable, thoughtful Chairman of the International Development Committee, the hon. Member for Hertford and Stortford (Mr. Wells). He has worked for the CDC, is familiar with its aims and knows what he is talking about, and is not merely a spokesman who is trying to climb the greasy pole of the shadow Cabinet.

The public-private partnership is at the very heart of the Government's development focus on working with others to eliminate poverty. As the hon. Member for Hertford and Stortford and other members of the Select Committee said last year in their report on the future of the CDC, the partnership is a

"challenging and unique opportunity for the best characteristics of the public and private sectors to be combined to make a significant contribution to poverty eradication".

After careful thought and consideration, that was the unanimous conclusion of a Select Committee that has Conservative members and a Conservative Chairman.

In today's debate, the proposals have been welcomed by Labour, Conservative and Liberal Democrat Back Benchers. It is only the Opposition spokesmen in this House who have criticised and questioned the Bill. When the Bill passed through the House of Lords, the Opposition's tone was completely different, perhaps because they have a little more knowledge about and understanding of development.

The hon. Member for South–West Devon (Mr. Streeter) praised the Secretary of State for the White Paper, the comprehensive spending review and everything that has been done. He should therefore understand that it is inconceivable that someone with that commitment and record would do anything to undermine the CDC's development role.

This is not a privatisation. Under public-private partnerships, there will not be windfall gains or fat cats, as we saw under Tory privatisations. That has been

assured through a combination of measures, such as the 25 per cent. shareholding, the golden share, the memorandum of understanding, the deed, the memorandum and articles of association and investment policy—*[Interruption.]* If, instead of gossiping among themselves, Conservative Members were to read such articles, they might be a little better advised and more informed.

The development of objectives will be entrenched in the public-private partnerships, as my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State has described. Private investors will not be able to walk away—as the hon. Member for South–West Devon said—from the objectives. Some may choose not to enter partnerships, but if they do so, they will know of the ethical investment policy to which the CDC must adhere. Investors will enter the partnership on that basis.

The hon. Member for South–West Devon said that we will create a huge development void in the poorest countries of sub-Saharan Africa and elsewhere. There is currently such a huge void in foreign investment. The purpose of these partnerships is to mobilise private capital for such countries and to demonstrate the attractiveness of investment in them. We shall be highlighting the attractiveness of the 70 per cent. of the poorest countries—not emerging markets, but pre-emerging markets, as the Chairman of the Select Committee rightly said.

The Opposition have suggested no alternative. The hon. Member for South–West Devon said that he intends to strengthen the Bill in Committee, but he has given no indication of how he will do so.

The hon. Member for South–West Devon also raised the question of tax treatment. Several hon. Members did so constructively, but the hon. Gentleman was negative and carped. I confirm to him and to others that, under the Government's extraordinary arrangements, a unique tax regime will be introduced for this public-private partnership, in which the private sector will have a majority shareholding. The tax amendments will exempt the partnership from United Kingdom corporation tax, arising, as the Chairman of the Select Committee said, from income and chargeable gains in its investment activities. The exemption will not extend to VAT, stamp duty, and so on. The proposal aims to create a level playing field, but nothing beyond that.

Mrs. Gillan: The Minister is obviously having a great deal of difficulty, as he blusters through a quite remarkable attack on my hon. Friend the Member for South–West Devon (Mr. Streeter). Does the Minister still believe to be true what he said in 1996, when he stated that the CDC

"is a public corporation and it will remain even more so under the next Labour Government"?—[*Official Report*, 20 May 1996; Vol. 278, c. 65.]

Has he not made a complete U-turn?

Mr. Foulkes: The hon. Lady was accusing me earlier of being a left-wing fanatic.

Clare Short: It is true.

Mr. Foulkes: I would not be in the Labour party if I were not left wing. The Labour party is a radical party.

In some ways, the hon. Member for Richmond Park (Dr. Tonge) was helpful; she welcomed the general proposals and rightly asked a number of specific questions, which can be discussed in Committee. Committee is the right place in which to discuss all such detail. The one thing that I did not appreciate was her misunderstanding in saying that the fact that full details of tax proposals were not yet available was an insult to the House. She is a relatively new Member. I have been in the House for 20 years, and have seen the introduction of major proposals not just in Committee but on Report. The unavailability of details is not really an insult to the House. We have been working on them and will table amendments on them in Committee, on which we shall have detailed discussion.

Dr. Tonge: Does the hon. Gentleman agree that the tax proposals are an integral and essential part of the Bill, without which it cannot be debated properly?

Mr. Foulkes: I have given an indication—my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State also did so—of the basis of the tax proposals. All that we have not done is provide what the hon. Member for South–West Devon described as "a piece of paper". We all know the value of some pieces of paper. We have given a clear indication of what has been agreed on the tax proposals. Detailed, technical amendments—that is all that we are talking about—to give effect to what my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State and I have said will be tabled in Committee. *[Interruption.]* Opposition Members can mutter as long as they like, but it will not alter the truth: we have given details of the exact tax proposals and said that amendments will be tabled in Committee.

The hon. Member for Hertford and Stortford asked some sensible questions—unlike his Front-Bench spokesman, the hon. Member for South–West Devon—on CDC finances. Some Opposition Members said that they would not want to wish this PPP ill, but then challenged and questioned CDC finances. No one underestimates the challenge that the CDC has been set to improve its financial returns while adhering both to its investment and ethical policies. My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State explained why CDC returns have been modest. She also described the 1998 results.

I can tell the House, and particularly the hon. Member for Chesham and Amersham (Mrs. Gillan), who has been asking about this matter, that the CDC—not the Government—expects a return to profitability in 1999. I hope that the hon. Lady will join me in hoping that that is so and encouraging the CDC in its efforts—*[Interruption.]* I am answering the debate. The hon. Lady asked a question, and she has her answer. She should be satisfied, instead of muttering away.

Several hon. Members asked about the CDC's financial relationship with the Government. The point about the period between the CDC becoming a public limited company and the assumption of private shareholdings is important. I refer hon. Members to the memorandum of understanding between the directors of the CDC and the Secretary of State, in which it says that the Secretary of State

"will give careful consideration to requests for assistance or guarantees under sections 9 . . . and 10 . . . assessing them against their impact on the value of the public sector's interest in CDC and on development and with regard to other claims on the funds available to her and all other relevant considerations".

[Mr. Foulkes]

For the period in question, arrangements will be exactly the same as they are at the moment.

This has been a useful debate. I welcome all the positive contributions to it, particularly from my hon. Friends, who are notably all fellow co-operators—people who believe in ethical investment and who understand it.

Mr. Wells: Will the Minister provide in Committee details of options available to the Government on dressing the balance sheet for sale?

Mr. Foulkes: I shall certainly look into that, and undertake—if it is possible—to do so.

We rejected the privatisation route. Instead, we are creating a public-private partnership, which gives us the best of both worlds: responsibility and enterprise, accountability and profitability. We also rejected the offshore route—the tax-haven route which the hon. Member for South-West Devon wanted. We have come up with a neat solution to give the CDC advantages, enabling it to compete on a level playing field without siting it offshore: again, the best of both worlds.

The public-private partnership will provide a double bonus for development. All the proceeds of the sale will be ploughed back into our development budget for further work in the poorest countries of the world, helping to eradicate poverty. That is one of the bonuses; the other is that the CDC will be able to mobilise further funds from the private sector for its development work. All hon. Members should welcome that, and I commend the Bill to the House.

Question put and agreed to.

Bill accordingly read a Second time, and committed to a Standing Committee, pursuant to Standing Order No. 63 (Committal of Bills).

COMMONWEALTH DEVELOPMENT CORPORATION BILL [*LORDS*] [*MONEY*]

Queen's recommendation having been signified—

Motion made, and Question put forthwith, pursuant to Standing Order No. 52(1)(a),

That, for the purposes of any Act resulting from the Commonwealth Development Corporation Bill *[Lords]*, it is expedient to authorise—

(1) the issuing out of the National Loans Fund of sums required by the Secretary of State for making loans to the Commonwealth Development Corporation or a company associated with it;

(2) the charging on and issuing out of the Consolidated Fund of sums required by the Treasury for fulfilling any guarantee given for the discharge of financial obligations of the Corporation;

(3) the payment out of money provided by Parliament of—

(i) sums required by the Secretary of State for fulfilling any guarantee given for the discharge of financial obligations of companies associated with the Corporation;

(ii) sums required by the Secretary of State in connection with the acquisition of, or of rights to subscribe for, securities issued by the Corporation and companies associated with it;

(iii) any increase attributable to the Act in the administrative expenses of the Secretary of State or the Treasury;

(iv) any increase attributable to the Act in the sums payable out of money provided by Parliament under any other Act;

(4) the extinguishing of liabilities of the Corporation and of companies associated with it in respect of guarantees under the Act and advances and guarantees under the Commonwealth Development Corporation Act 1978;

(5) the payment of sums into the Consolidated Fund or the National Loans Fund.—*[Mr. Pope.]*

Question agreed to.

Modernisation of the House of Commons

[Relevant document: The Second Report from the Procedure Committee, Session 1998-99, on Procedural Consequences of Devolution: Second Interim Report (HC 376).]

Motion made, and Question proposed,

That this House approves the Second Report from the Select Committee on Modernisation of the House of Commons on Sittings of the House in Westminster Hall (House of Commons Paper No. 194).—[*Mrs. Beckett.*]

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Mr. Michael J. Martin): Madam Speaker has selected the amendment tabled by the right hon. Member for Bromley and Chislehurst (Mr. Forth) and the hon. Member for Macclesfield (Mr. Winterton), at end add

'except for paragraphs 17 and 24, and considers that the new sittings should be known as the Commons Committee; that the Wednesday morning sitting devoted to private members' business should not be transferred to Westminster Hall; and that the seating plan to be adopted should be as set out in Appendix 2 of the Report.'.

I also understand that it will be for the convenience of the House if we debate motion No 4:

That in the next Session of Parliament the Standing Orders and practice of the House shall have effect subject to the modifications set out below:

(1) On days on which the House shall sit there shall be a sitting in Westminster Hall—

(a) on Tuesdays between ten o'clock and one o'clock;

(b) on Wednesdays between half-past nine o'clock and two o'clock; and

(c) on Thursdays beginning at half-past two o'clock and continuing for up to three hours (and in calculating that period no account shall be taken of any period during which the sitting may be suspended owing to a division being called in the House or a committee of the whole House).

(2) Any Member of the House may take part in a sitting in Westminster Hall.

(3) Subject to paragraph (12) below, the business taken at any sitting in Westminster Hall shall be such as the Chairman of Ways and Means shall appoint.

(4) The Chairman of Ways and Means or a Deputy Chairman shall take the chair in Westminster Hall as Deputy Speaker; and the House may appoint not more than four other members of the Chairmen's Panel to sit in Westminster Hall as Deputy Speaker.

(5) Any order made or resolution come to at a sitting in Westminster Hall (other than a resolution to adjourn) shall be reported to the House by the Deputy Speaker and shall be deemed to be an order or resolution of the House.

(6) If a motion be made by a Minister of the Crown that an order of the day be proceeded with at a sitting in Westminster Hall, the question thereon shall be put forthwith, but such motion may be made only with the leave of the House and may not be made on a Friday.

(7) The quorum at a sitting in Westminster Hall shall be three.

(8) If at a sitting in Westminster Hall the opinion of the Deputy Speaker as to the decision of a question (other than a question for adjournment) is challenged, that question shall not be decided, and the Deputy Speaker shall report to the House accordingly; and any such question shall be put forthwith upon a motion being made in the House.

(9) If any business other than a motion for adjournment is under consideration at a sitting in Westminster Hall, and not fewer than six Members rise in their places and signify their objection to further proceeding, that business shall not be further proceeded with in Westminster Hall, and the Deputy Speaker shall report to the House accordingly, and any order under paragraph (6) above relating thereto shall be discharged.

(10) At the end of each sitting in Westminster Hall, unless a question for adjournment has previously been agreed to, the Deputy Speaker shall adjourn the sitting without putting any question; and proceedings on any business which has been entered upon but not disposed of shall lapse.

(11) The provisions of Standing Orders No. 29 (Powers of chair to propose question), No. 36 (Closure of debate), No. 37 (Majority for closure or proposal of question), No. 38 (Procedure on divisions), No. 39 (Voting), No. 40 (Division unnecessarily claimed), No. 41 (Quorum), No. 43 (Disorderly conduct), No. 44 (Order in debate), No. 45 (Members suspended, &c. to withdraw from precincts), No. 45A (Suspension of salary of Members suspended) and No. 163 (Motions to sit in private) shall not apply to sittings in Westminster Hall.

(12) The House shall meet on Wednesdays at half-past two o'clock, and paragraphs (1) and (2) of Standing Order No. 9 (Sittings of the House) shall have effect on Wednesdays; and Standing Order No. 10 (Wednesday sittings), so far as it relates to business taken before two o'clock, shall apply only to sitting in Westminster Hall, and shall have effect as if paragraph (3) were omitted.

Madam Speaker has selected the following amendments tabled by the right hon. Member for Bromley and Chislehurst: the first to paragraph (7), leave out 'three' and insert 'six'; the second to paragraph (9), second line, leave out 'six' and insert 'three'.

7.12 pm

The President of the Council and Leader of the House of Commons (Mrs. Margaret Beckett): I speak as Chairman of the Modernisation Committee.

I should like to make three things clear at the outset. First, this is not a Government proposal, although I personally support it. It stems from the Modernisation Committee's own research into a novel procedure used in Australia, and from the Committee's ideas on how that procedure could be adapted for use in the House of Commons. I believe that its originator here was the right hon. Member for East Devon (Sir P. Emery)—who, as hon. Members will have recognised, is not a Labour Member.

I know that the Modernisation Committee is very grateful to those—especially the Clerk of the Australian Parliament—who were good enough to come here and give evidence to us.

Mr. Andrew Robathan (Blaby): Will the right hon. Lady give way?

Mrs. Beckett: I should like to make a little more progress.

Secondly, the motion gives the House the opportunity to conduct an experiment. The experiment, involving sittings in the Grand Committee Room off Westminster Hall, would give private Members more time—let me repeat that, because, inexplicably, some members of the press have got hold of the wrong end of the stick—more time to debate some of the many issues that, while undoubtedly worthy, are unlikely ever to find space in the crowded schedule of the Chamber. It could also allow time for more focused debates on, say, foreign affairs, or discussion of more Select Committee reports. Some 180 Select Committee reports are published each year, but time cannot be found for debate of more than about 12 a

[Mrs. Beckett]

year on the Floor of the House. What is being proposed is an addition to, rather than a substitute for, what we can do now.

Mr. David Maclean (Penrith and The Border): I have listened carefully to what the right hon. Lady has said about the impossibility of finding time to debate those matters on the Floor of the House. However, I am conscious that, in the past year, we have had the longest summer holiday in history, the longest Christmas holiday in history and an extra four days' Easter holiday; moreover, I think that we are about to have the longest Whitsun holiday in our history. If we had shorter holidays than we have been used to having, would we not have time to debate these matters?

Mrs. Beckett: I do not have the figures with me, but, according to my recollection, most of the figures that the right hon. Gentleman has just given are incorrect. The summer holidays and the Christmas holidays were not the longest, and the Whitsun holiday will not be the longest either. The right hon. Gentleman may go on holiday when the House rises, but most hon. Members devote time to their constituencies, or indeed to other work. I am afraid that I reject what the right hon. Gentleman has said, and it is clear to me that the House does as well.

Mr. Edward Leigh (Gainsborough): Does the right hon. Lady agree that our problem is caused less by the fact that we have not enough time than by the fact that the time we have is so badly used? In some debates, such as those on Kosovo, it is virtually impossible to be called, while at other times the Whips are running around desperately trying to get any hon. Members to speak on subjects about which they know hardly anything. Would it not be better to allow debates in the Chamber to come to a natural end—if necessary, by arranging votes at fixed times, rather than providing for them to begin at the end of the debates preceding them?

Mrs. Beckett: A number of suggestions have been advanced about how we could use our time better. No doubt, some will be aired in this debate. However, it is my understanding that the House of Commons sits for rather longer hours than most other legislatures.

Mrs. Gwyneth Dunwoody (Crewe and Nantwich): Can we now dispense with the fiction that we are sitting for shorter hours? In fact, so much business is being jammed into sittings on Mondays, Tuesdays, and Wednesdays that Members are being removed from Select Committees and other Committees. We are told that there is not enough time, but in fact the timetable is being skewed.

Mrs. Beckett: I do not entirely share my hon. Friend's view on this occasion. I feel that there is a degree of exaggeration about the extent to which the changes in the pattern of sittings of the House are affecting other pressures on the House's time. However, although I fear I cannot share my hon. Friend's view entirely, it is a legitimate view, to which no doubt she may return.

Mr. Robert Sheldon (Ashton-under-Lyne): My right hon. Friend said that the sittings in Westminster Hall would be an experiment. Some of us are quite relaxed about that, provided that the sittings will clearly be an experiment; but, if substantial sums are involved in the moving of furniture, there may be pressure to continue them. Will my right hon. Friend assure me that the sittings really will be an experiment, and that we can view the matter rather more objectively?

Mrs. Beckett: That brings me to the point that I was about to make. I assure my right hon. Friend categorically that what is proposed is an experiment—and, indeed, an experiment that will need to be reviewed, so that we can see whether, if it is approved, changes need to be made.

Mr. Robathan: Will the right hon. Lady give way?

Mrs. Beckett: May I answer my right hon. Friend's question first?

My third point is that the experiment will not require the House to make substantial or additional financial outlay. Work already scheduled for the Grand Committee Room will be brought forward, and the Committee and the House of Commons Commission have asked the House authorities to make every effort to find offsetting savings and to reprioritise within proposed works. The Committee took evidence about those matters from the Clerk of the House and from the Serjeant at Arms. I much regret—as, I think, does the whole Committee—that we did not formally involve the Accommodation and Works Committee and the Administration Committee, and I assure members of both Committees that no discourtesy was intended. The Modernisation Committee was, however, very mindful, following evidence from Officers of the House that the time scale for a decision to facilitate an experiment in the autumn was short. The House having been alerted to discussion of the proposals in the debate on our last report held before Christmas, it was felt that the matter should be put to the House for decision as quickly as possible.

Sir Sydney Chapman (Chipping Barnet): The right hon. Lady will know that, as Chairman of the Accommodation and Works Committee, I had cause to write to her expressing disappointment that we had not been consulted earlier. Let me take this opportunity to thank her for what I can only describe as a very gracious reply.

Mrs. Beckett: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman. The hon. Member for Broxbourne (Mrs. Roe), who chairs the Administration Committee, also wrote to me, and I have replied to her. She notified me that she would not be able to be present this evening.

Mr. Robathan: I apologise for intervening so early, but I particularly wanted to comment on the right hon. Lady's first point.

I have read the report, and I think there is much good sense in it, although I do not support it in general. Can we clarify the ground rules for the debate? The right hon. Lady's first point was that this was not a Government report, and I accept that; but will she say categorically that there will not therefore be a payroll vote?

Mrs. Beckett: Quite categorically, it is a matter for the House. It is a free vote and it is for the House to decide whether it wishes to undertake the experiment.

The Modernisation Committee identified a number of possible time slots for the sittings, but proposes three for the purpose of the experiment. The times are chosen to avoid a clash with questions and statements in the Chamber. Indeed, two of the proposed sittings would take place when the House was not sitting. The proposal is that two of the sittings should be for private Members' debates that are taken on the Adjournment, and the third for other House business, such as I have described.

The demand for such debates far outstrips what the House can accommodate at present. Applications for the daily half-hour, end-of-business Adjournment exceed the number of opportunities by five to one. For the longer Wednesday debates, applications exceed the opportunities by 10 to one.

The proposed Tuesday morning sitting, from 10 am to 1 pm, would follow the very popular Wednesday precedent of one 90-minute and three 30-minute private Member's debates on the Adjournment. Wednesday morning Adjournment debates would move—as was suggested to the Modernisation Committee in evidence—to Westminster Hall, and would last for the same time as now: from 9.30 until 2, making the Chamber available to visitors.

The Thursday afternoon sitting—of three hours starting at 2.30—would be available for a general debate, say, on a recent Green Paper, or a specific foreign country. About half those sittings could be used for extra Select Committee reports chosen by the Liaison Committee.

Ms Hazel Blears (Salford): With the advent of regional development agencies and the regional assemblies, clearly, regional business will become increasingly important to the House. In the north-west, we recently had two excellent debates on regeneration and on north-west transport. Can my right hon. Friend confirm that such regional issues, which are important to many of our constituents, will find a place in Westminster Hall debates?

Mrs. Beckett: It would be a matter for the House. I sympathise with my hon. Friend's wish for such issues to be aired. I have some other thoughts on how best that might be done and would rather—again, it is a personal view—that the Committee be used for issues that have a particular regional focus, but may transcend one individual region: for example, concerns about a main rail line. However, I entirely share her view that it is an extra resource available to the House to air issues that it is not now easy to find time to air.

Dr. Stephen Ladyman (South Thanet): My right hon. Friend has already said that it is an experiment, but can she assure me that, when it is reviewed, we will consider not just whether to continue with the Westminster Hall Committee, but whether to extend the range of business that might be taken in it?

Mrs. Beckett: We are getting somewhat into the realms of the hypothetical. If the House decided to conduct such an experiment and it proved to be a success, there might be pressure from Members to expand the procedure in the way in which my hon. Friend mentions, but we are by no means at that point at present.

The sittings would be chaired by the Chairman of Ways and Means and his deputies, or by senior members of the Committee of Chairmen. They would be open to any Member to attend. As with a similar body in Australia, only non-controversial business would be taken and only with the agreement of the House. The Committee hopes that the sittings might be of particular interest to a wider and more specialised group of media commentators: for example, technical or subject-oriented journals or correspondents.

The Committee was conscious of the concern that is bound to be felt in some quarters—which may be expressed in the debate—that the sittings might detract from the Chamber itself, but believed, after much thought and discussion, that the potential advantages of such an additional forum outweighed those dangers—and might, indeed, ease the frustration of those many Members whom the Chair cannot call to contribute to debates in this Chamber with the frequency that they would wish.

If the report is approved, the experiment proposed will commence with the new Session in the autumn. Along with the development of pre-legislative scrutiny, it is perhaps the most fundamental of the changes that the Modernisation Committee has yet put before the House. It would increase opportunity for scrutiny of public affairs, and Parliament's capacity to hold the Executive to account.

Some calculation has been made of the increased opportunities that the experiment might provide for the House. Before we have any more remarks about sitting for an extra half an hour here and there, or giving up a day of what is described as a holiday, let me draw to the attention of the House the potential increase in debate time.

The proposal would provide for some 140 extra Back-Bench Adjournment debates a year on Tuesday mornings; that is four a week for some 35 weeks. It would enable up to three dozen extra Select Committee reports to be debated on Thursday afternoons. It would allow for some 17 or 18 extra general debates on subjects for which the House cannot find time.

In total, we are talking about nearly 200 extra debates a year. Hon. Members on both sides of the House frequently call for the opportunity of increased scrutiny. That is what the proposal, coming from an all-party Committee, provides. I hope that the House will give it a fair wind.

7.26 pm

Sir George Young (North–West Hampshire): The motion is certainly an issue on which Conservative Members have a free vote. It is a House of Commons matter, on which there will be a wide variety of views. On balance, I will support the proposition that is before us, but I will be neither dismayed nor surprised if some of my right hon. and hon. Friends come to a different view.

I begin with two general points. First, I am not an uncritical supporter of the recommendations of the Select Committee on Modernisation. I objected to the previous recommendations on Thursday sittings—to which the hon. Member for Crewe and Nantwich (Mrs. Dunwoody) referred—with their compression of the working week at Westminster. They emanated not from the Committee, but from the Government, and have made it more difficult for us to hold them to account. Of course, I understand that it may be popular with some Members of Parliament, but that does not make it right for the Commons. I look forward to returning to that issue when the evaluation of the experiment is carried out and completed.

[Sir George Young]

Secondly, as the Leader of the House said, we are being asked tonight to decide not whether the Westminster Hall Committee is the right way forward, but whether to proceed with the trial and, in the light of that, whether it is a sensible reform for the House.

Initially, I was suspicious of the proposals for a Main Committee, as it was called at the time, because of the centrifugal impact it might have on the Chamber. I will explain why those fears are not soundly based, but, as we took evidence from those who have tried a similar solution and as we analysed the strategic problems that confront Parliament as a whole, I was persuaded that we should give the proposal a go. It offers the opportunity better to hold the Executive to account. That is possibly the biggest challenge that Parliament faces at the moment.

One can divide proposals for reform of the House into two main groups: first, those that facilitate or expedite the legislative process—Special Standing Committees, carry-over motions and guillotines; secondly, those, such as Opposition days, which facilitate the "holding to account" process. There is an element of overlap in some reforms, but that distinction is helpful. The House has focused too much recently on the first type of reform.

The way that the proposal for the Westminster Hall Committee is structured is to focus on the second objective and to give the House a greater ability to hold the Executive to account, rather than to enable the Executive to push through more inadequately considered legislation. Paragraph 33 of the report makes that clear. Business can be referred to the Westminster Hall Committee only by agreement. If any orders of the day are referred to the Westminster Hall Committee, one objection can block the reference, as is explained in paragraph 41.

The type of business to be referred to the Westminster Hall Committee is essentially for holding the Government to account, principally by giving Back Benchers more time. If one wanted one paragraph that encapsulated the flavour of the report, it would be paragraph 23, which gives the impact very well.

The House is simply unable to patrol all the frontier between it and the Executive. The Westminster Hall Committee will give us opportunity to do that better, with more of the general debates that are held on Wednesday mornings, more Adjournment-type debates, and more debates on Select Committee reports.

It is worth quoting from the evidence of the Chairman of Ways and Means, on page 4 of the minutes of evidence, who said:

"However, there is, I believe a prima facie case for a carefully prepared experiment".

He goes on to deal with the balance that he believes that we should have.

The Westminster Hall Committee will be part of tilting back the terms of trade, which have swung too much the other way—a process that has accelerated under the current Government, who have consistently bypassed and undermined the House of Commons. Indeed, one has only to consider the events of last Wednesday—on the U-turn on trial by jury, and the Speaker's rebuke that went with it—for evidence of that proposition. Today, there was further evidence of it with the news that the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry planned a statement outside the House on sub-post offices, earning yet another rebuke.

The Westminster Hall Committee will not put things right on its own, but I think that—if read in conjunction with paragraphs 60 to 62, which are at the end of the report, but vital to it—it may be part of a solution. There is a need to look again at the Chamber in the light of the recommendation and the work of the Procedure Committee on the consequences of devolution.

Mr. Dale Campbell-Savours (Workington): The right hon. Gentleman will know that the proposed Committee will be an experiment. I wonder what action he intends to take—or whether he intends to offer advice to some of his hon. Friends, such as "Awkward Eric"—if Conservative Members were to decide simply to object, thereby preventing the entire arrangement from having an experimental period?

Sir George Young: If the hon. Gentleman looks at paragraphs 23 to 26, he will see that some references may be made without the matter coming to the House as a whole. I am quite sure that my right hon. Friend the Member for Bromley and Chislehurst (Mr. Forth) needs no lessons from Labour Members on how to use the procedures of the House. However, paragraph 41 makes it quite clear that one objection will be sufficient to block certain references to the Westminster Hall Committee. The hon. Gentleman makes a valid point, and I am sure that Opposition Members will already have noticed it.

It is significant that, without dissent, the Select Committee accepted the proposition, in paragraphs 60 to 62, that the terms of trade between Government and the House should be shifted back to the House. That brings me to the argument about the impact of the proposed reform on the Chamber, which featured both in the evidence and in our discussions. Of course I understand the anxieties about that impact.

I regard the proposal before us as an evolution of other reforms, such as the introduction of Standing Committees after the second world war, and the expansion of Select Committees after the 1979 general election. Before those developments, the work was done either not at all, or on the Floor of the House. The House recognised that, if it were to do its job effectively, it would need forums other than the Chamber from which to operate. The same arguments that can be made against Westminster Hall were, doubtless, made against Standing Committees and Select Committees—that they would divert hon. Members from the Chamber, and thereby devalue the Chamber.

On both occasions, however, the House decided that its primary task was the holding of Government to account and the proper scrutiny of legislation. The House decided on those two reforms, ensuring that, so far as possible, the new Committees did not always sit at the same time as the Chamber—as we have sought to do with our proposal of avoiding sitting during Question Time and statements.

I know of no one who now wants to reverse the introduction of Select Committee or Standing Committees. The debate has moved on, to how we can make them more effective. Those forums are able to cause Ministers as much discomfort as the Chamber, as the report on Sierra Leone, to mention only one example, has shown.

Mr. David Davis (Haltemprice and Howden): I am glad to hear my right hon. Friend mention the importance

of Select Committees, which—certainly in the past couple of years—have been one of the better mechanisms in holding the Government to account. However, a Select Committee's primary weapon is publicity and embarrassment, by airing the facts of real events. One of the most important mechanisms in performing that task is bringing Select Committee reports to the Chamber on Wednesday mornings.

My right hon. Friend says that the Committee will be an experiment. How will he measure the effectiveness of that experiment? Specifically, will he compare the effectiveness of a chamber at the other end of this building in debating problems aired in Select Committees reports—

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. Interventions must be brief.

Sir George Young: My right hon. Friend has raised the key issue of how we shall monitor the experiment's effectiveness. Although it is difficult to say in advance whether the experiment will be a success, I tell him that the publicity that Select Committees receive is derived not from the location of their sitting, but from the nature and persistence of their questioning and, quite often, the Minister's inability to respond to it.

Mrs. Dunwoody: Will the right hon. Gentleman give way?

Sir George Young: I should like first to finish the point, which may address one of the concerns of my right hon. Friend the Member for Haltemprice and Howden (Mr. Davis).

If such an exchange were to take place in the Westminster Hall Committee, I believe that it would receive every bit as much publicity as some of the exchanges that we have had in Select Committee. The important matter is not so much a Committee's location as the nature of its questioning and the effectiveness of the ministerial reply to that questioning. If such an exchange takes place in the Westminster Hall Committee, I believe that it will receive every bit as much coverage as if it occurred anywhere else in the building.

Mrs. Dunwoody: I should be interested to know on what the right hon. Gentleman bases that assumption. As the reporting of Parliament is consistently going down—including the reporting of this Chamber—why does he think that, if the press is not reporting one Chamber, it will effectively report two?

Sir George Young: I was making the point that devaluation of the Chamber was caused not by introduction of Select Committees or Standing Committees, but by other, extraneous factors for which Labour Members bear much responsibility.

It is certainly not the case that introduction of Select Committees after the 1979 general election led to any devaluation of the Chamber's reputation. I regard the establishment of the Westminster Hall Committee in the same way as I regard the establishment of Standing Committees and Select Committees: as other forums in which Ministers may be held to account. I do not believe that either Standing Committees or Select Committees led to undermining of the Chamber's reputation—that was due to other causes.

Mr. Peter L. Pike (Burnley): Is it not important to remember that, if the report is approved, and as it very clearly states, Select Committee reports that are debated in the Chamber of the House will continue to be debated there, not on Wednesdays, but at a different time? The additional venue will also allow for debate on 36 Select Committee reports that are not debated.

Sir George Young: The hon. Gentleman is right to say that we are proposing additional time for Select Committees reports.

I was making the point that Standing Committees and Select Committees are excellent institutions, but that they are constrained both by membership and by subject. They are not as flexible as the proposed Westminster Hall Committee—which all hon. Members will be able to attend, and which may deal with any subject.

Mr. Andrew F. Bennett (Denton and Reddish): Will the right hon. Gentleman give way?

Sir George Young: I shall give way—perhaps for the last time, as we are constrained and other hon. Members may wish to speak.

Mr. Bennett: When the right hon. Gentleman pays tribute to the Select Committee system, is he confident that the proposals will not undermine that system? What will be the priorities? Will a Minister be required to reply to an Adjournment debate or to attend a Select Committee? Often, Select Committees are pursuing with a Minister a particular line of interest, and attendances are fixed several weeks in advance. Adjournment debates tend to be fixed at much shorter notice.

Sir George Young: It is not unusual for one Department to be confronted with demands on the time of more than one Minister to attend Standing Committees and Select Committees. Adjournment debates will continue to be held at the end of the day in this Chamber, whereas the Westminster Hall Committee will be meeting earlier in the day, in Westminster Hall. Therefore, there will be no conflict of the specific nature described by the hon. Gentleman.

Mr. Nicholas Winterton (Macclesfield): Will my right hon. Friend give way?

Sir George Young: I shall, out of respect for my hon. Friend—but this must be the last time.

Mr. Winterton: I am grateful to my right hon. Friend for giving way to an Opposition Member. He has stressed the importance of Select Committees. If Select Committees are so important—I believe that they are—and their reports are very helpful to the House, does he accept that Government, Opposition and the usual channels should respect the integrity of Select Committees and not seek to undermine them?

Sir George Young: My hon. Friend takes me way beyond my negotiating remit by referring to how Select

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Committees are handled. When I was a Secretary of State and was regularly interrogated, my Government paid special attention to Select Committee reports. Every Minister would be wise to do so. One or two have tried to ignore the findings of Select Committees in this Parliament and have come unstuck.

The decline of the Chamber is not primarily due to the establishment of rival forums in the Houses of Parliament in which matters are debated. The reasons are deeper and the Government have much to answer for. If I am right to say that the establishment of Standing and Select Committees was not responsible for the decline in influence, the establishment of a Westminster Hall Committee need not injure the Chamber either. On the contrary, like the Select and Standing Committees, it might enable Parliament to do its job better.

I was keen that paragraph 55 of the report should specify that the experiment would not increase planned expenditure on the House this year. The House should observe the same discipline that it imposes on other public bodies. I was reassured to hear what the Leader of the House said about expenditure. I understand the sensitivities of members of the Accommodation and Works Committee. In retrospect, I think that we should have contacted them earlier in our deliberations.

To sum up my views, I think that it is worth giving this a go. It has the potential to enable us to do our job more effectively, but it should not be seen as a total solution. That will come only with an Administration committed to restoring the influence of the House in the nation's affairs. This is not such an Administration.

7.41 pm

Mrs. Gwyneth Dunwoody (Crewe and Nantwich): As we are debating a report to the House and to Members of all parties, I feel free to say whatever I wish, not least because, although I am fond of Mr. Ian Harris, the Clerk to the Australian Parliament, who gave evidence to the Committee, I know that for all his gentle tone he is a great persuader. I have debated with him whether the establishment of a separate Committee will enhance the work of the Chamber or detract from it. I was not persuaded by him, so I am hardly likely to be persuaded by the report.

The House is effective not only when it asks hard questions, but when it is able to debate with the people who are responsible for the legislative decisions that they are putting forward. We suffer from under-reporting in the press. The situation has changed a great deal since I entered the House. In those days, a Back-Bench speech made as late as 8 o'clock at night would be at least partly reported. That is no longer the case. There are many talented and brilliant sketch writers, but the reporting of the factual debate of the Chamber is going down and down. With the honourable exception of *The Independent*, which endeavours to maintain a parliamentary page, most national papers treat the House of Commons as if it did not exist.

Mr. Desmond Swayne (New Forest, West): Does the hon. Lady accept that, as a consequence of the powers that the House has given to Ministers in enabling legislation and given to Brussels through the treaties to which we have acquiesced, what we say here is of little importance, so it is hardly remarkable that it is not reported?

Mrs. Dunwoody: That is a great load of nonsense. A previous Prime Minister—the first woman Prime Minister—chose rarely to call her Cabinet together except when she wanted something written on the back of an envelope and frequently underplayed the role of the House of Commons. This is not new.

Helen Jackson (Sheffield, Hillsborough): This is a relevant intervention. Does my hon. Friend accept that one of the potential benefits of the proposal for sittings of the whole House in Westminster Hall is that it might give good opportunities for the specialist media that do not belong to the Lobby here?

Mrs. Dunwoody: That is a load of nonsense. The specialist media are given Select Committee reports ahead of publication. They have direct contact with many of the specialist Committees. It is not the specialist press or the regional press who fail to report what we say. It is the general media, the broadcasters and the national newspapers. Unless we understand that, we shall not be able to carry this debate further.

I am worried that, whether we like it or not, the mere mention of the word "modernisation" makes some Members of Parliament leap up and down and say "What a brilliant idea." The result is that ever more work is pushed into three days of the week. Members of Parliament now expect not to be here on a Friday. That was not so in the past. Members usually reserved Fridays for their constituencies, but if there was major legislation they would be here and they would expect to vote. That is the other major difference. The rearrangement of the hours of Parliament—indeed, the lengthening of the hours of Parliament—has taken from Back Benchers the right to call a vote. That has not been fully acknowledged in the reports or by some of those who are debating the new proposals.

Select Committee reports gain status from being debated here. They are not a specialist interest to be tucked away in some nice little place where they will not give us any inconvenience. They are one of the driving forces that make Ministers answer questions. I am not surprised that both Front Benches agree on the issue. Some of my hon. Friends fail to understand that when there is agreement between both Front Benches on political developments, Back Benchers should ask why. One reason is that such developments frequently take from Back Benchers the right to debate awkward questions.

Mrs. Beckett: I bow to no one in my respect for the Select Committees and their Chairmen, including redoubtable Members such as my hon. Friend the Member for Crewe and Nantwich (Mrs. Dunwoody), but it is far from clear to me how, given that only a limited number of Select Committee reports are debated at present, the offer of debates for a further 30 reports that would not otherwise be debated can diminish the power of Select Committees.

Mrs. Dunwoody: Then let me explain. I may not be clever, but it seems to me that reporting debates on

12 reports that take place in the Chamber is better than not reporting debates on 30 reports somewhere else. That is a real possibility.

Mrs. Beckett: I assure my hon. Friend that the proposal would not have gone through the Modernisation Committee had the members of the Committee thought that it meant that the Select Committee reports that are currently taken in the Chamber would no longer be taken here. The hon. Member for Macclesfield (Mr. Winterton) for a start would never have gone along for a second with such a proposition.

Mrs. Dunwoody: I am delighted to hear that, but I have been here long enough to see changes that are presented as temporary experiments slide into being rather more permanent than one would expect.

Mr. Mike Gapes (Ilford, South): Will my hon. Friend give way?

Mrs. Dunwoody: I am so glad to have so much assistance in my speech.

Mr. Gapes: In the last Parliament, the Foreign Affairs Committee produced a large number of reports. I remember a report on Britain's relations with Hong Kong and China that was of great topical interest. We had to wait more than a year for a slot to debate it in the Chamber. If there had been another opportunity, we could have debated the report—which would have been embarrassing to the Government in some respects—earlier, influencing the debate sooner.

Mrs. Dunwoody: I look forward to the arrival of nirvana. If at the end of the experiment my hon. Friend has to tell me, "It is extraordinary. We got the debate, but somehow nobody knew what we were talking about", I shall refrain from saying, "I told you so."

It is nonsense to keep talking about the arrangement of the furniture as part of the problems of the House of Commons. When I was in opposition and had responsibility for health matters, I went to speak in the constituency of a very important lady who was full of the idea that we should not speak to the assembled crowds from a dais. We took our chairs and tables down to the floor of a large church hall, and the meeting proceeded. After 15 minutes, a voice came from the rear of the hall, saying, "I can't hear a word you're saying"—after which we took our chairs back to the stage, from where we were heard clearly.

I hope that we are not suggesting that arranging everyone in a hemicycle—the fashionable thing to propose—will change our confrontational politics. We confront one another in the House because we have differing views—that may come as a shock to some. Consensus is possible only when people agree on what they are talking about, and does not depend on where they are sitting. I sat next to a delightful gentleman from Luxembourg—who was supposedly of the same political view as myself—for many years and, apart from the fact that he shook my hand every time I got up to go to the loo, which was mildly embarrassing, we never came any closer because we were sitting in physical proximity. That may come as a considerable surprise to everybody.

If we are carrying out an experiment, I do not see why the cost should be so great. If we stuck with the existing arrangement, we might not be fashionable and we might not be in the vanguard of change, but we might exercise a degree of common sense which I find sadly lacking in the report.

7.51 pm

Sir Peter Emery (East Devon): The Leader of the House, with her usual perspicacity and charm, tried to pass to me the credit for the paternity of the report. I must make it clear that my only suggestion in the Committee was that we needed to find more time to debate the reports of Select Committees. We have moved a long way from that.

Since I came to the House in 1959, we have never had enough time on the Floor of the House to debate the number of matters that hon. Members have demanded week in, week out that we debate. The present Leader of the House does quite well in passing on requests. When he was the Leader of the House, Rab Butler had an absolute formula for dismissing requests—he said, "Not this week." The demand for more debates on the Floor of the House was nearly as great then as it is now.

The important question is this—will the experiment allow Members of Parliament to debate more matters than can currently be debated on the Floor of the House? If that can be done sensibly and reasonably, there is something to be said for it.

Paragraph 60 of the report ought to be highlighted. It says:

> "We share the concern expressed to us by many Members about the diminution of the importance of this Chamber in our national life."

If the experiment lowers the standing of the Floor of the House in terms of the life of the nation, it will be a failure. However, I believe that the experiment may well enhance the standing of the House.

On a number of occasions, we have needed longer periods to debate major foreign affairs and defence matters, including Kosovo. We have not had time to debate these major factors in the life of the nation on the Floor of the House. If we can provide more time through the use of the Westminster Hall Committee, it will be to the benefit of us all.

Let us make certain that we do not follow the approach of the present Prime Minister. I am worried that he wishes to downgrade the House of Commons. He is seldom here, and he plays up to the presidential aspects of his job. If we follow his approach, the experiment will fail.

The Westminster Hall Committee can, perhaps, begin to debate Select Committee reports, although I must tell the hon. Member for Crewe and Nantwich (Mrs. Dunwoody) that the report states that we must not decrease the number of Select Committee reports that are debated on the Floor of the House. As the choice of the debates will rest with the Liaison Committee, we must charge the Committee to ensure that that does not happen.

The newer hon. Members will not know what a private Member's motion was. We used to have a ballot, and there were 10 days in which a Member could select a motion of his choice, put it on the Order Paper and move it on the Floor of the House. That has gone, and that is a

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great pity. It was one of the few powers that Back-Bench Members had to raise an important matter on the Floor of the House.

When I came to the House, there were 100 to 120 early-day motions a year, and we debated five, six or even 10 of them. When was an early-day motion debated on the Floor of the House in the past 10 years?

Mr. Maclean: As so many early-day motions are now dross and deal with inconsequential things, their status has been diluted by trivial matters. We might have some early-day motions debated if colleagues could limit them to 100 per annum.

Sir Peter Emery: I agree absolutely with my right hon. Friend. Tabling an early-day motion when Fulham win the championship, for example—or on something with an equal lack of importance—is nonsense. That is not a matter for a resolution of the House. However, some of the 1,500 early-day motions that are tabled are of importance and would be worthy of debate. If those could be debated in the Westminster Hall Committee, that would not be a bad thing. It would allow Members to express views that they are unable to express on the Floor of the House at this time.

When the main recommendation was passed, I happened to be in hospital. I would not have agreed to the introduction of a hemicycle, as I believe the Committee should reflect our parliamentary Chamber. I am glad to see that if the hemicycle does not work, we can return to the original structure.

I understand the genuine worry of hon. Members about the downgrading of the Chamber. If that is an effect of the experiment, it must cease. However, if the proposal does not downgrade the Chamber, and if it provides an opportunity for more people to speak and many more issues to be debated in a parliamentary manner, it will be worthy of an experiment.

Let it be understood that we will have to make a judgment on the Floor of the House on whether the experiment has succeeded. It must not be allowed to slip on and on and become part of the furniture, as so many experiments have done. We must set a date—perhaps in July, 14 months from now—for the matter to come back to the House so that we can consider the experiment in full and judge whether it has succeeded. On that understanding, the House would be wise to let it run for that period.

8 pm

Dr. Phyllis Starkey (Milton Keynes, South-West): I am enthusiastically in favour of the report. It is important to consider it in the context of the other reports already published by the Modernisation Committee and of the Committee's overall agenda, which has been to try to improve the effectiveness of the House of Commons and of individual Members of Parliament.

The public expectation of the range of activities that we should do—and especially our constituency case load—has increased over the years, and that has made it increasingly difficult for individual Members of Parliament to fulfil all the different facets of their role effectively. The most important facet of our role is as members of the legislature, but we also have important roles in scrutiny, in holding the Government to account and in representing our constituents' interests. It is extremely difficult to do all that in the time available.

It is especially difficult for Government Back Benchers to contribute in the Chamber. When there are debates on less popular issues it is fairly easy to get in, but the crucial debates are often heavily oversubscribed and, even with time-limited speeches, many of us are unable to get in. I expect that the demand to speak in such debates is suppressed because Back Benchers know that even if they put their names down, the chances of being called are slim. If we are called, it is likely to be at the very end, and hon. Members are disinclined to sit here for six hours on the off chance, especially when there are so many other demands on our time.

Mrs. Dunwoody: If one makes a speech in a debate, is not one of the courtesies to listen to others advancing their points of view? If we simply make a speech and then leave, is not that the antithesis of debate?

Dr. Starkey: I accept that point absolutely, but I note that many of the more senior Members, who are lucky enough to be called early in debates, do not observe that courtesy and remain to listen to the contributions of those who are called later in the debate.

Select Committee reports are not well discussed on the Floor of the House. I agree absolutely with the point made by my hon. Friend the Member for Crewe and Nantwich (Mrs. Dunwoody) that Select Committees are a crucial part of our scrutiny mechanisms and are often hugely more successful in that role than ministerial questions or even Opposition day debates. The reality, however, is that most Select Committee reports are unheard by the House; and I suspect that most of them are unread by most Members of Parliament who do not happen to be members of the Select Committee concerned.

We have heard that fewer than 10 per cent. of the reports are debated on the Floor of the House; apparently, more than two thirds are not even referred to on the Floor of the House. That is a huge waste of the efforts of the members of those Select Committees and of the enormous expertise that goes into the reports. The proposals will go some way towards remedying that situation by providing additional time to debate them.

Adjournment debates are a key way in which Back Benchers can define the agenda of the House. All too often, the role of Back Benchers is simply to respond to an agenda set by their Front-Bench colleagues. The Adjournment debate is the one chance for Back Benchers to raise either issues of concern to their constituents or specialist issues. In an Adjournment debate they can consider in much greater depth issues that they might otherwise attempt to raise in questions.

For example, my hon. Friend the Member for Southampton, Test (Dr. Whitehead) secured a debate on the governance of universities that raised interesting questions about the way in which certain governing bodies are not living up to the high expectations that we have of them. As we have heard, Adjournment debates are heavily oversubscribed, and I expect there is suppressed demand. I think that it was my hon. Friend the Member for Ilford, South (Mr. Gapes) who made the point about the timing and timeliness of Select Committee reports;

similarly, there may be a constituency issue that one wants to highlight, but the moment may have passed by the time one's name comes up.

Mr. Steve Webb (Northavon): I agree with what the hon. Lady says, but does she share my reservation about the proposals in that one element of them is the removal of the Wednesday morning Adjournment debates in the House? Surely we could have additional time in the House, too, so that we do not end up debating welfare reform at 3 am.

Dr. Starkey: The reason for suggesting the change on Wednesday mornings—incidentally, an additional three hours is set aside for Adjournment debates in the Westminster Hall Committee, so they are not simply being shifted from one place to another—was to try to meet the concern that many hon. Members expressed about the lack of access to the Chamber for visitors. The proposal is experimental and it would clearly be open to hon. Members to suggest the reinstatement of the Wednesday morning sessions here in the main Chamber.

A recent Modernisation Committee report changed the hours of sitting on Thursdays. Conservative Members—and some Labour Members—keep putting it about that the change has somehow reduced the time available in the Chamber, but it has not. It has rearranged the hours but not made any change to the time available. It appears to me that it has allowed us to make much better use of Thursdays than before. We rarely used to have a full day's business on a Thursday, but now we can have that and still allow our more distant colleagues to get back to their constituencies for the weekend.

None of the earlier proposals dealt with the essential problem that we want to fit in too much business in too little time. The proposals for a parallel Chamber in Westminster Hall will create that extra debating time without increasing the overall hours of sitting. Very unusually, we are in a win-win situation. The right hon. Member for North–West Hampshire (Sir G. Young) outlined the advantages for the Opposition, and there are advantages for the Government, but most of all there are huge advantages for Back Benchers. It is extremely important to get that idea across. The Opposition argue that the power of the Executive in Parliament is too great, and the one part of that argument that I would accept resides in the fact that Back Benchers have very little room to discuss their issues. The proposals will give them more power and even up the balance between them and Front Benchers.

The idea of a parallel Chamber was borrowed from the Australian Parliament. Members of the Modernisation Committee have seen a video of the Australian Main Committee. It was not a good advertisement because it was excruciatingly boring, but I suspect that that reflects more on the Australian Parliament than on the difference between its primary Chamber and its Main Committee. The interesting lesson from Australia is that the experience has been extremely positive. There was a significant body of opposition to the idea in the first place, but hardly anyone opposes it now. People have changed their view after seeing the Main Committee in operation.

The Westminster Hall Committee will have several advantages. The proposed Westminster Hall Committee will provide an alternative forum and will allow business to be discussed, the demand for which is currently unsatisfied. Several people have mentioned what sort of business that should be, but the key point is that it would mean an increase in the time for private Members' Adjournment debates and for Select Committee reports. Extra business could also be taken in Westminster Hall. For example, when we have debates on foreign affairs, instead of a wide-ranging debate that flits about the world illogically in a disconnected series of speeches, we could have debates on a specific region, giving some continuity and sense to the proceedings.

Mr. Maclean: I do not entirely follow the hon. Lady's train of thought that discussing a geographical region is necessarily the most sensible approach. If one is discussing an ethical foreign policy, for example, it would make sense to discuss Africa, South America, Malaysia and perhaps other parts of the world. That approach would ensure consistency.

Dr. Starkey: We could have a topic-based debate, if we wanted to talk about an ethical foreign policy. However, it is also important to have regional debates. The Foreign Affairs Committee is considering the trans-Caucasus and it would be sensible to have a debate on that subject. That would raise issues that might be lost in a general debate about foreign policy.

The Westminster Hall Committee would also give us an opportunity to debate Green Papers and other Government consultation documents. At the moment, it is rare for such documents to be discussed on the Floor of the House. Such debates would give Members of Parliament an opportunity to contribute at the beginning of the consultation period, instead of having to wait until policy had been decided, when anything they said would be much less effective.

My hon. Friend the Member for Salford (Ms Blears) mentioned the opportunities for regional debates and she gave an example of interest to her region. I would be interested in a debate on the east-west rail link, for example. That issue covers about four different regions, but is of interest to Members who represent constituencies along the route.

Westminster Hall debates would also allow greater participation for a wider range of Members. I have mentioned the difficulties Back Benchers have in participating in debates in the Chamber. Many hon. Members bring specific expertise from their previous lives that they rarely have an opportunity to use. Debates in Westminster Hall, on more specialist topics, might allow them to do so.

Different arrangements are proposed for the Westminster Hall Committee. The anecdote retailed by my hon. Friend the Member for Crewe and Nantwich illustrates the point that if a hall has no amplification, there is a reason for having the speaker on a platform; if the hall has decent amplification, there is no reason for that. It is a reality that the way in which a meeting is organised influences the way people behave. People who are enamoured of the confrontational set-up try and argue that the arrangement makes no difference, but they defend vigorously the need to stick to it.

Some debates are confrontational. I am as confrontational as the next person and I enjoy the cut and thrust of party debate when the issue being debated

[Dr. Starkey]

actually divides the parties. However, many issues—especially those likely to be discussed in Westminster Hall—do not divide the parties. They may provoke differences of opinion, but those might run across the parties. A hemispherical and more consensual seating arrangement is much more conducive to a genuine, complex debate—the sort of debate that goes very badly on the Floor of the House.

Mr. Paul Tyler (North Cornwall): Has the hon. Lady noticed that if we had been sitting in that format tonight, the hon. Member for Crewe and Nantwich (Mrs. Dunwoody) would have been sitting next to the right hon. Member for Bromley and Chislehurst (Mr. Forth)?

Dr. Starkey: That would be my hon. Friend's choice. Some of us went to look at the Grand Committee Room when it was laid out as it would be for the hemispherical arrangement. We could not believe that it was the same room, because the change made it much more pleasant. It would also be much more useful for meetings when it was not in use for the Westminster Hall Committee.

Another issue for consideration is how to open up the Westminster Hall Committee to people from outside and the possibility of facilities for the press, including the regional and specialist press. It has been remarked that most of the press coverage of Parliament at the moment is through the Lobby journalists, who tend to concentrate on the big political debates, especially those in which there is conflict. That is what makes good political copy and gets on the front page. The debates in Westminster Hall would often be of great interest to sections of the public, but they do not interest the Lobby journalists, who do not have the expertise to follow them and do not understand why they are interesting.

The current press coverage of the House does us all a great disservice. It gives the public a distorted view of the proceedings of the House by focusing only on the big set-piece controversial debates and ignores all the hard work done elsewhere in the House. By giving additional space for regional and specialist press, Westminster Hall would widen the press coverage for the House and get coverage of interesting and complex debates in the specialist press. For example, a debate in the House on women in science was of enormous interest to the scientific press, and had it taken place at a more conducive time and place, the reporters from the scientific press would have been here instead of having to rely on my press releases afterwards.

Mr. Graham Brady (Altrincham and Sale, West): Do not the technical press normally read the *Hansard* report? They get all the details from that and rarely work to close deadlines.

Dr. Starkey: They can get the details from *Hansard*, but if that was a satisfactory way to cover the House, Lobby journalists would never bother to be here—they would just wait for *Hansard*. They come here because they get the news hot off the press, so to speak, and also because they get the flavour of the debate, which it is difficult to get from *Hansard*. *Hansard* writes it all down, but it is all incredibly dry compared with the toing and froing of some debates. I am not sure, for example, that *Hansard* will have quite caught the flavour of the question and answer in Prime Minister's Questions last week involving the hon. Member for Southend, West (Mr. Amess), whereas the Lobby journalists, being present, got the flavour in full.

This House has a tradition of evolutionary reform and this proposal is part of that approach. It is a response to changing times and expectations. It offers an excellent opportunity to the House to respond to those changes and I enthusiastically urge support for the proposals.

8.19 pm

Mr. Andrew Stunell (Hazel Grove): I speak as an enthusiastic supporter of the report, a member of the Modernisation Committee and a member—by some strange quirk of fate—also of the Procedure Committee and the Broadcasting Committee. I have considered the proposals from various angles over the past few months. Those who wish to advocate strongly on either side should consider the underlying questions—what is this House for; is it doing that job properly; and, if not, what are the most effective ways of making it do so? The second report offers a good, practical critique of what is not working very effectively at present. It contains a good encapsulation of the criticisms that Members of the House—on both the Front and Back Benches—have, and of their frustrations about the way in which things work.

It is worth asking what the House is for. I maintain that it is not for getting good press coverage, or for securing a certain number of television minutes. The House has a constitutional purpose. Reforms, and the resistance to them, should be based on whether that constitutional purpose is enhanced.

The first major job of Parliament and the House of Commons is to provide the ingredients for Government, so that a Government can be formed and their activities legitimised. This debate does not cover that task, although much could be said: the phrase "elective dictatorship" still resonates for many people 30 years after it was coined.

The second task for Parliament and the House of Commons is to ensure that the legislation produced to form the laws of the land is coherent, effective and sound. The Leader of the House said that the Modernisation Committee has made some useful moves in that direction. It has called for pre-legislative inquiries, and proposed that legislation be rolled over so that it can be produced more evenly throughout the calendar year. It has also proposed that timetabling be used in certain agreed circumstances, and suggested that follow-up reviews be conducted into legislation that has been passed—something that we have not yet reached. In addition, there has been an important report on changing the scrutiny of European legislation.

We must recognise that there have been failures in the way that the House has handled legislation in the past. The Child Support Agency achieved all-party support and was a catastrophe; the poll tax achieved anything but all-party support but was also a catastrophe in legislative terms.

The volume and complexity of legislation is increasing all the time. The pressure comes just as much from members of the Opposition parties as from Government manifesto commitments. The Modernisation Committee has also taken evidence about the backlog of law still

awaiting processing in the House. There are Law Commission reports for which time cannot be found, and other pieces of non-controversial but difficult legislation also await consideration. For example, my hon. Friend the Member for Winchester (Mr. Oaten) is tackling adoption legislation in a piecemeal way—perhaps I should say that he is dealing with one specific aspect of the legislation—simply because there is not sufficient time for the Government to produce comprehensive proposals.

The pressure is always to find more time and space in the House, and to find better ways and mechanisms for getting legislation through, after proper consideration, and for getting it enacted and reviewed. The report does not propose making more time for legislation, but it will achieve that by removing work from the House of Commons. That is the benefit to be gained.

Another of the functions of the House and of Members of Parliament is to hold the Government to account. Hon. Members are more than familiar with the processes involved in questions, statements, debates and ministerial responses. However, I want briefly to make a case for the half-hour Adjournment debates, which in essence offer the opportunity for extended questions to and answers from Ministers.

We have heard tonight that there are five times more applications for the late-night Adjournment debates than there are spaces available, and that there are 10 times more applications for the Wednesday Adjournment debates than there are opportunities to hold them. Those debates are not simply a chance for hon. Members to put out press releases, which was the somewhat sneering contention made at one point in the discussion. They are much more to do with holding the Government to account over local or specific injustices or over general policy.

Mr. Maclean: The hon. Gentleman says that Adjournment debates are an opportunity to hold the Government to account, but when did such a debate last frighten a Government and hold them to account?

Mr. Menzies Campbell (North–East Fife): The debate on war pensions.

Mr. Stunell: That will do for one, but those who criticise the effectiveness of Adjournment debates need to say when last a question—written or oral—received an answer that was not already under the Government's control. It can be argued—although I do not do so especially strongly today—that it is hard to put one's finger on a single aspect of our procedure that produces results. The examination of statutory instruments came to the Committee's attention recently. In the 1995-96 Session, 209 statutory instruments came before the House. Not one was amended in any way—or rejected, or delayed—as a result of parliamentary scrutiny.

The argument is not about whether Adjournment debates achieve anything. The whole process of politics raises a question about the effectiveness of Members of Parliament. This debate is about providing opportunities to increase the pressure on Government for accountability, and about providing the pressure to ensure that there is better accountability.

Another function of Members of Parliament is to represent our constituents and to seek justice and equity for them in what is the highest court in the land. We do that by means of parliamentary questions and letters to Ministers, but many hon. Members would like to do it through the extended question-and-answer sessions offered by Adjournment debates. At the moment, there are 240 Adjournment debates each year. If those debates were shared out, each Member of Parliament would get about one debate every three years. The need and pressure to do more in that regard is clearly intense.

The proposal for the Westminster Hall operation that is before us today is certainly not a magic solution or a panacea. I absolutely agree with the right hon. Member for North–West Hampshire (Sir G. Young) that the proposal will go only a small way towards putting right some of the problems that we face in making this place effective. However, the proposal can make time for proper consideration of controversial legislation in the House of Commons. It can help to find time for Select Committee reports, as has been noted. It can also help to provide opportunities for major Adjournment debates, and the hon. Member for Milton Keynes, South–West (Dr. Starkey) has suggested that that would be useful for foreign affairs debates about specific areas.

The proposal also means that we will be able to hold more 30-minute Adjournment debates, which will help to hold the Government to account and allow constituents' concerns to be heard and answered. We shall have an opportunity, not much mentioned so far, to comment formally at an earlier stage on Green Papers and consultation documents.

The proposal should find favour with all Members of the House.

Mr. Eric Forth (Bromley and Chislehurst): No.

Mr. Stunell: It should benefit Back Benchers, our constituents, Select Committees and those who introduce reports from those Committees. It should allow those with special policy interests to develop them formally. It should benefit both the principal Opposition and the other Opposition parties, giving an opportunity to challenge and discuss what the Government are doing across a wider range of topics. It even gives the Government some benefits, offering the opportunity for improved outputs from both the House and the Government.

The right hon. Member for East Devon (Sir P. Emery) said that the value of the House of Commons should not be downgraded. I agree with that, but I must point out, as one who sits in on Adjournment debates and pays attention to what happens here, that the proportion of Members who find it possible to spend a significant amount of time in the Chamber is low. If 10 per cent. of Members are here, the 60 or 70 of them make the House look full, but the other 90 per cent. of Members are finding other things to do. The proposal poses no great risk to the credibility or effectiveness of the Chamber, and the new arrangements will provide opportunities for Members to bring concerns into the public domain and to challenge the Government.

To those who have muttered throughout my speech, from Bromley and from other places, I can say only that a mixed message comes from the critics. The right hon. Member for Bromley and Chislehurst (Mr. Forth) has appeared to maintain from a sedentary position that he can see nothing wrong with the present system and everything wrong with any suggested change. Yet I have heard the

[Mr. Stunell]

right hon. Gentleman several times speaking with outrage about the Government's overweening power and the way in which the House is being suborned and undermined.

We have before us an opportunity to improve the situation, but, lo and behold, the right hon. Gentleman is not jumping to embrace the idea, but doing his very best to wreck it. It is time that he made a short trip to the road to Damascus. He ought to recognise that if he wants improved accountability and more effective control of the Executive, our current procedures are not sufficient.

I wish that the proposals before us went further. I wish that we were proposing sittings lasting the full 18 hours proposed in the Select Committee report, not the shorter sittings proposed in the motion. I should like other things too, and I have mentioned them elsewhere. We should move rapidly to having statements timetabled in the way that questions are, so that Departments are given slots for statements. We should do the same with Select Committee reports. The proposal that topics should be chosen for debate by the Liaison Committee reflects our present procedures, but it might be more appropriate to give Select Committees a slot and allow them to choose the report for debate.

I would set aside additional time for Adjournment debates scheduled by Department or by policy area, so that bids for them could be more structured than they are under our current random system. I support the suggestion of the right hon. Member for East Devon that we should seek to restore some quality control and effectiveness to early-day motions and private Members' motions, although I am afraid that I am too young to know anything about the latter.

I urge the House to support these sensible and symbolic proposals for improvement. They are a step towards a more modern and effective legislature, and I hope that the House will resist the various wrecking moves.

Mrs. Dunwoody: On a point of order, Madam Speaker. When we have this new, excellent Chamber, will there be a continuation of the Standing Order that states that hon. Members should not read their speeches word for word?

Madam Speaker: I am sure, and I would hope, that our Standing Orders will apply to the parallel Chamber. The strictures on rhetoric and repetition should also apply.

8.35 pm

Mr. Peter L. Pike (Burnley): I speak as another enthusiastic supporter of the Westminster Hall Committee. I hope that not only will the report and the proposed Standing Order changes be accepted, but that it will be the will of the House to give the experiment a fair wind and trial and not to kill it at birth.

I am one of those Members who believes that some of the Modernisation Committee's proposals to date have not been the subject of the experimentation and trial that I would have liked. If the carrying over of legislation and many other proposals had been fully implemented, it could have improved the way in which the House scrutinises and works. However, I accept that it is early days and experiments are still taking place.

It is important to accept this proposal because it will enable the House and the Modernisation Committee to consider the parliamentary year and week. I am not talking about Members of Parliament working less because that is not what I am in the business for. We have a varied and mixed job, with work here and in our constituencies, but sometimes that work is not as effective as it should be. It is nonsense that we do not know when the recesses will be. I accept that the House could be called back and the dates changed in a national emergency, but we should be able to plan. Our constituents think it crazy that we cannot tell them when we will be in the constituency.

Likewise, non-sitting Fridays tend to come in groups and then we have a mass of sitting Fridays. If one has urgent things to do in the constituency—and this is particularly true of those hon. Members who represent constituencies some distance away—it is extremely difficult. Sometimes, I have a whole list of things waiting for me to do. As you may remember, Madam Speaker, I was involved in three successive private Members' Bills on Fridays, and that makes life difficult.

Once the new system is working, I would like private Members' Bills to be moved to Wednesdays. That has not been discussed or agreed by the Modernisation Committee, but it is my view. That would be a fairer way to scrutinise and debate such Bills and it would allow the opportunity for them to make progress if they have the support of both sides of the House. That is one reason why I want to open up our procedures and allow more time for debate.

The cost of the experiment is being kept to a minimum. The Modernisation Committee was concerned about cost and one or two hon. Members have mentioned it in the debate. Most of the expenditure referred to in the report was scheduled for the Grand Committee Room in any event either this year, next year or the following year. That money would have to be spent anyway.

Mr. Swayne: No.

Mr. Pike: Yes. It is scheduled in the programme of work. We were told so by the Serjeant at Arms when he gave evidence to the Committee. We made it absolutely clear that we did not want the purpose-built furniture for the experimental period and that we must find furniture within the House to make the experiment possible. It is important to remember that.

I strongly support the proposal that the experimental parallel Chamber should take the form of a semi-circle. The Welsh Assembly and the Scottish Parliament have not gone for the format that is used in this Chamber because they wanted to try something new. I would strongly resist, as would you, Madam Speaker, the suggestion that we should knock the walls down to the Division Lobbies and put in a new Chamber here. This Chamber is right—it is historically right and we should preserve it. However, in the new situation it is right to start with something new. That is one reason why I opposed the idea that the experiment should take place in Committee Room 14, which was one option.

Anyone who is keen on the Select Committee system, as I am, should fully support the proposal. I have listened to my hon. Friend the Member for Crewe and Nantwich (Mrs. Dunwoody) and I have great regard for her, but I strongly disagree with her on this issue. The proposal will create extra opportunities to consider Select Committee reports that are not currently debated and so serve a more

useful purpose. I should have thought that any hon. Member on a Select Committee would welcome that. Paragraph 28 of the report clearly states that the Liaison Committee will retain its role in determining the subjects to be debated.

The additional opportunities for hon. Members to hold Adjournment debates are welcome and important, but enough has been said on that. We should keep motions under review. I hope that not only the Modernisation Committee but the whole House will keep the experiment under review. We should not wait 14 months but learn from how the new Chamber functions. If we need to adjust it in December, January or February, we should make the adjustment straight away. Obviously, that would have to be done under the Standing Order changes that we are considering today.

The right hon. Member for East Devon (Sir P. Emery) mentioned early-day motions. Like him, I think that they have become nonsense. They can congratulate anyone. We once congratulated a football club on reaching its highest league position, although it has now been promoted to the Premiership. That shows how silly some early-day motions have become. In Committee and elsewhere, I have noted the dangers of saying that early-day motions should be determined as of right. We should not work by numbers, but by importance and subject. We all get letters and other forms of pressure and the fact that we receive a certain number on a certain subject does not necessarily prove that it is the most important. We must watch that carefully.

As an Opposition Member, I spoke on South Africa in a foreign affairs debate when the person before me had spoken about China and the person after me about Brazil. What nonsense. The new Committee will allow us to discuss important subjects. I accept that sometimes an issue, not the region, will be important, but that can also be accommodated.

The proposal is a tremendous move forward. Once we have experimented with it, given good will and an intention to make it work, in a year or two we will want to sit more than the proposal allows. It will be good for the Opposition, the Government, and most important, for the Members of this House to debate the issues that we feel are important.

8.43 pm

Mr. Eric Forth (Bromley and Chislehurst): I oppose the proposal and dispute almost every aspect of both it and way in which it has been presented in the report. I want to take issue immediately with what I see as the report's rationale, which is contained in paragraph 3. It states:

"There is almost universal agreement that there are matters which the House should discuss,"—

that is probably true because it is an easy and cheap thing to say—

"which a large number of Members would wish to discuss,"—

I doubt that—

"but for which there is simply not enough time."

I wish first to take issue with the point about time. Typically, my right hon. Friend the Member for Penrith and The Border (Mr. Maclean) went to the heart of the matter. The truth is that there is no shortage of time, or there need not be. We are leaving a day early for our recess this very week. The Leader of the House has had the gall to say that we do not have enough time but proposes that the House rise a day earlier than originally envisaged. That gives some sense of the urgency involved.

Mrs. Beckett: I am sure that the right hon. Gentleman was here—I know that he listens with great assiduity to what is said in the Chamber—when I pointed out that the time proposed in the report would suffice for 200 extra debates. I doubt whether we could accommodate those, even in an extra day.

Mr. Forth: I was coming to that point. The Leader of the House should not be so impatient. I am developing my initial thoughts, and I do not think that she wants to detain me for too long at this stage of the debate.

Having demonstrated the extent to which we lack time by sending the House away unnecessarily early, the Government have also, in effect, abolished Friday sittings. The House used to sit on Fridays; we used to regard our job here as a proper job that would take up our time. Apart from private Members' Fridays, Friday sittings have now all but gone. We have casually tossed aside parliamentary days. That strikes me as slightly odd when we hear that we are short of time.

Business in the House is often unnecessarily prolonged by the Whips for the convenience of Members. People outside the House do not understand that matter fully—perhaps mercifully, for hon. Members. However, we all know that, because a vote is timed for 10 o'clock, if a debate naturally comes to an end before that time, the Whips will encourage Members to come into the Chamber to prolong the debate for the convenience of other Members returning at 10 o'clock. To allow the debate to finish naturally at 6 o'clock or 7 o'clock, as many debates would do, allowing us further time to carry out other business, would inconvenience many Members because they would have to be in the House. That is the last thing that Members want. They always want to be somewhere else on Fridays—

Mr. Gapes *rose*—

Mr. Forth: Here is one of them. I give way to the hon. Gentleman.

Mr. Gapes: I am grateful to the right hon. Gentleman. Has he considered his role in wasting parliamentary time, over many weeks, on Fridays and late at night?

Mr. Forth: The hon. Gentleman obviously believes that to be in the Chamber and to participate in debates is wasting time. That is where he and I fundamentally disagree. My point is that, for those of us who believe that participation in debates should be most of what we do, it is important that that time should be used properly. We like to spend time in the Chamber; we believe that that is a valuable exercise. The hon. Gentleman does not share that view—

Dr. Ladyman *rose*—

Mr. Forth: Here is another. I give way to the hon. Gentleman.

Dr. Ladyman: I am grateful to the right hon. Gentleman. May I put the point slightly differently? Is it

[Dr. Ladyman]

not true that he represents a constituency in the Greater London area? It is, therefore, much easier for him to attend the House on Fridays, but still to give his constituency the attention that it deserves. That is less easy for Members from further afield.

Mr. Forth: That might seem to be a clever point. However, as the hon. Gentleman is never here on Fridays, he will not be aware that my right hon. Friend the Member for Penrith and The Border is in the Chamber every Friday that I am here. He and I believe that it is important to be in the Chamber in order to discharge our parliamentary duties. I do not know whether the hon. Gentleman's constituency is further away than Penrith and The Border—I doubt it—but if my right hon. Friend can take his duties that seriously, I suggest that the same should be true of most hon. Members.

Dr. Ladyman: The last time that I was in the Chamber on a Friday, I heard the right hon. Gentleman and the right hon. Member for Penrith and The Border (Mr. Maclean) filibustering a Bill that was supported by almost everyone else in the House. That was wasting parliamentary time.

Mr. Forth: The hon. Gentleman was obviously not here last Friday, when his Government talked out a Bill that also enjoyed a wide degree of support. I do not think that it is useful to trade those sort of exchanges, although I shall gladly do so because, to date, the Government have objected to more than 30 private Members' Bills—a total to which even I cannot remotely aspire.

Mr. Maclean: I am grateful to my right hon. Friend for giving way. I too was going to point out that the Labour Government have blocked more than 30 Bills so far this Session. Will my right hon. Friend bear in mind that, on most Fridays, Ministers have congratulated him, and sometimes even myself, on tabling amendments that improved Bills? I will give the hon. Member for South Thanet (Dr. Ladyman) the references if he wants me to do so; I have used them extensively in press releases.

Mr. Forth: I hope my right hon. Friend will share those references with me. I would probably find them useful as well.

The time element is bogus. The truth is that, if Members wanted to find more time, they would be perfectly capable of doing so. The tragedy is that there is a conspiracy among those who manage our time: they send Members away from here as much as possible, but then have the gall to come here and say that there is not enough time.

I also dispute the notion that there is huge demand for the change. It strikes me as bizarre that it is proposed that the quorum of the exciting new development, for which there is such demand, should be three. We have been told by those who have participated in the debate that the new Chamber will be crowded with excited Members who have important matters to debate—but the quorum is to be set at three. That does not suggest any great demand.

Mr. Andrew Dismore (Hendon): Would the right hon. Gentleman remind us how many Members voted on Friday at the end of the debate on the private Member's Bill?

Mr. Forth: Yes, three Members voted on Friday. That only three of them were here to vote is surely a disgraceful condemnation of the 417 Labour Members of Parliament. I agree with the hon. Gentleman that the number voting was a shameful display of Labour Members' lack of interest in the House of Commons.

I doubt that the change is to be carried out as an experiment. We have heard that before and we know that change is a one-way street. I remember hearing that televising the House was to be an experiment, yet it was automatically continued because of a sort of momentum that such developments gather. We know that changes that are designated experiments are rarely reversed, because a sense of ownership develops among those who have a vested interest. I also doubt the reassurances in respect of expenditure.

Mr. Tyler: I am fascinated by the right hon. Gentleman's new line of argument. Is he saying that we should never experiment or make any change; or that, if any change is to be made, it should not be experimental? He would appear to be arguing in favour of one or the other of those propositions, but I do not understand which.

Mr. Forth: I am not a great advocate of change and I make no secret of that. I am generally rather satisfied with the way the House runs under your excellent tutelage and guidance, Madam Speaker, so I am in no rush to make gratuitous and unnecessary changes.

Mr. Maclean: Those hon. Members who are in favour of the new system and suggest that it is somehow evolutionary ignore the fact that Prime Minister's Question Time has been changed, initially without Madam Speaker's consent, and that the House of Lords is to be abolished. Wholesale changes are being made to Parliament, so to suggest that the proposed development is a minor change that can be treated in isolation is preposterous.

Mr. Forth: My right hon. Friend is absolutely correct. Therefore, I feel no sense of shame when I say that I am not a great advocate of or enthusiast for change.

To return to the subject of expenditure, I was about to refer to appendix 4, headed "Further Letter from the Serjeant at Arms" and dated as recently as March 1999. The Serjeant at Arms gives the total cost of this foolish exercise as £870,000 and adds, most revealingly:

"there is no provision for expenditure of the order of £870k on the Grand Committee Room in next year's estimates . . . and the indications are still that a Supplementary Estimate will be required for the Works Vote to cover the costs of the work."

So much for the bogus claims that the proposal carries no financial implications and can somehow be fudged through under existing expenditure plans.

Mr. Pike: What I said was that the money was in the rolling programme. The Serjeant at Arms made it absolutely clear that, if we did not spend the money this

year, it would be spent within the next two years, or three years at most. The money had to be spent on things that urgently needed doing.

Mr. Forth: I am sure that the taxpayer will be hugely reassured that this is all part of rolling expenditure. Taxpayers must feel really relieved to be told, "Don't worry—it was all going to be rolling expenditure, but it's just been brought forward a bit." I do not believe that and I do not suppose that most of the taxpayers I encounter will either.

I shall now speak briefly on the substance of amendments that you have kindly selected, Madam Speaker. I hope to divide the House at the appropriate time. The first simply reflects my belief that, instead of giving the new chamber the rather misleading name of "Westminster Hall"—I cannot imagine where that term comes from, since it is not Westminster Hall that we are dealing with—we should call it the "Commons Committee". If we are to have it at all—I would rather we did not have it, and I want to vote against the substance of it—we should call it the Commons Committee to make it clear that, were such a ghastly experiment to be embarked on, it would be clearly subsidiary to proceedings in the Chamber of the House of Commons.

My second amendment seeks to retain Wednesday morning sittings in this Chamber and to make anything that happens in another Chamber subsidiary to debates in this place. There is no question that what happens in another Chamber can be a substitute for sittings in this place. We must make that absolutely clear.

I also seek modestly—I was tempted to pitch the figure higher—to make the quorum six instead of three. I have thought about this issue for some time. Presumably a Minister would be present, with a Whip on duty, perhaps an Opposition spokesperson and the perpetrator of the debate. Therefore, I think that a token extra two or three Members should be sufficient to signify the huge demand that we are constantly told there will be for such debates. If we are to believe the comments this evening, this Chamber is normally crowded with 40 or 50 Members of Parliament. Therefore, I think it is reasonable to rule a sitting of the parallel Chamber inquorate if there are fewer than six Members present. That is a reasonable level so as to test demand.

The absurd, politically correct and consensual hemicycle arrangement must be resisted as a continental nonsense run wild. I make this point with some feeling because—I do not often admit this in the Chamber, but I shall do so to the few friends sitting around me—I was once a member of an institution that met in a hemicycle. For five fascinating years, I sat at a desk with a microphone and a voting machine. That institution was called the European Parliament—I say that as quietly as I can, Madam Speaker. I must make that admission about my past, but I cannot say that I was too enamoured of the arrangement. This Chamber allows for much more lively and legitimate debate, and it is far better than having Members sitting in designated places, usually reading from pre-prepared speeches and breaking the Standing Orders, as has been mentioned in the debate.

Those are my reasons for opposing this change. I think it is unnecessary, dangerous, expensive and almost certainly irreversible. I fear that it will divert attention away from the Chamber and feed the myth that the Leader of the House and others are attempting to perpetuate, that somehow there is huge pressure on the time of the House. The truth is that, if we wanted to find the time, we could sit on Fridays, reduce the recesses and not rise a day early. We could also shorten debates that do not generate sufficient interest and spontaneously debate other issues. Admittedly, such changes would require a degree of commitment from hon. Members that I suggest is simply not there any more. For that reason, more than any other, I regret this measure.

8.58 pm

Dr. Stephen Ladyman (South Thanet): I am delighted to follow the right hon. Member for Bromley and Chislehurst (Mr. Forth) in the debate because an article that I read in yesterday's newspaper prompted me to seek to catch your eye this evening, Madam Speaker. In yesterday's *Sunday Telegraph*, the right hon. Gentleman is reported as saying that he believes that the Government are creating another opportunity for hon. Members to drone on and on. I nearly choked on my breakfast when I read that—a case of a sootier pot calling a kettle black I have never heard of.

The right hon. Gentleman mentioned the sitting hours of the House and said that our recesses are too long. However, he ignores completely the fact that hon. Members have constituency duties that many of us try to discharge well, and that requires considerable amounts of time. If I were given a magic wand with which to reform the House in any way that I saw fit, I would grant the extensions of time in this Chamber to which the right hon. Gentleman referred as well as establishing a parallel Chamber in Westminster Hall. I think we could occupy both Chambers for greater lengths of time by debating important issues that concern our constituents.

Opposition Members often say that the purpose of the House of Commons is to challenge the Executive and hold it to account, yet tonight some of them are rejecting the opportunity to do that to a greater extent.

Mr. Maclean: Does the hon. Gentleman seriously think for one moment that his Government would introduce and support these proposals if they thought that they would result in the Government having to be more accountable to Parliament?

Dr. Ladyman: Yes, I do. The Government have introduced many reforms of the House. I shall give the right hon. Gentleman two examples. First, he and I sat on the Select Committee that considered the draft Bill to set up the Food Standards Agency. That procedure had not been used before and gave the House an opportunity to examine Government legislation in greater detail.

Secondly, I have just finished participating in a Special Standing Committee considering the Immigration and Asylum Bill, which was another attempt by the Government to increase parliamentary scrutiny. Previous Conservative Governments set up no such Committees in their 18 years in power.

[Dr. Ladyman]

Several hon. Members have made a slip of the tongue and referred to the proposed experiment as the Westminster Hall Committee. As I understand the proposals, they do not relate to a Committee, but specifically refer to the House sitting in Westminster Hall.

Mr. Tony McNulty (Harrow, East): How can that possibly be if the sittings will involve only 51 Members?

Dr. Ladyman: Under the proposed arrangements, all Members will have the opportunity to attend and sit in Westminster Hall. There are not enough seats in this Chamber to accommodate every Member, so how many seats are available in the new Chamber is neither here nor there.

My point is that we cannot argue that the House will be diminished when all that is being proposed is that the House should sit in a place other than this Chamber. The same Members will be contributing to the debates and the quality of the debates will be entirely dependent on the quality of those Members, just as it is in this Chamber. I therefore reject the argument that the House will be diminished.

The proposals will allow us to debate a wider range of subjects. If I have any criticism of the report it is that the proposals will not allow a sufficiently wide range of subjects to be debated in the new Chamber, and I hope that the range will be extended in the future. I wrote to the Modernisation Committee and suggested that we could reasonably assign to the new Chamber the Committee stages of constitutional Bills. At present, those debates occur on the Floor of the House.

Mrs. Dunwoody: Is my hon. Friend suggesting that changes to the United Kingdom's constitution should be debated in a subsidiary room in which only 50 Members can appear?

Dr. Ladyman: I am absolutely not suggesting that because the proposal is not for a subsidiary room but for the House to sit in Westminster Hall.

Mr. Gerald Bermingham (St. Helens, South): Does not my hon. Friend agree that the one thing that experience teaches us about this place is that the chances of being called to speak are pretty slim? In a 51-Member Chamber, will not the chances of a Member being called be even slimmer?

Dr. Ladyman: If my hon. Friend will forgive me, I will deal with that point in a moment because the answer to his question is one of the most important reasons why we should set up such a Chamber.

In addition, the new Chamber could consider certain aspects of European legislation. The Select Committee on European Scrutiny recommends that many aspects of European legislation should be debated on the Floor of the House, but we cannot do so. Is there not an opportunity for extending the scrutiny of European legislation?

Mr. McNulty: Does my hon. Friend agree that there might be further opportunity to have those debates on the Floor of the House if we retained Wednesday morning sittings, rather than abolishing them as the report suggests?

Dr. Ladyman: My hon. Friend makes a good suggestion. When the experiment is reviewed, no doubt one of the proposals that we could consider is restoring Wednesday morning sittings in addition to having sittings in Westminster Hall.

My final reason why Westminster Hall will be a great improvement to the Chamber is that it will provide more speaking opportunities for the Members who have so few opportunities to speak in this Chamber.

You, Madam Speaker, spend a great deal of your time—it is one of your most important duties—trying to be fair in calling Back Benchers. It would be disrespectful if I called what goes on in your office when deciding who should be called as black art, so I shall refer to it as divine magic. Although it is pretty impenetrable to me, I can work out some of the factors that you consider when deciding whom to call.

You balance the debate; you do not reflect the membership of the House. Given that 60 per cent. of hon. Members sit on the Government Benches, and only 40 per cent. on the Opposition Benches, we on the Government Benches are at an immediate disadvantage.

Mr. Christopher Fraser (Mid–Dorset and North Poole): Come and join us.

Dr. Ladyman: I am loth to answer that sedentary intervention.

Government Members have far fewer opportunities to be called. One of the factors that you probably take into consideration, Madam Speaker, is the frequency with which we have contributed to debate. By the end of a parliamentary year, a Government Member who has contributed less than oneself is more likely to be called first. One is therefore increasingly unlikely to be called not only in important debates, but even in relatively less significant ones.

As it works out, new Government Members can be called probably only six or seven times a year. That means that we must manage our contributions—not using up all our opportunities to speak—so that we may have a reasonable chance of being called later in the year in debates that are important to our constituents. A further Chamber, sitting in parallel, could provide an opportunity to contribute to debates on Select Committee reports, for example—many of which are important to our constituents—without using up our opportunities to speak.

Mr. Bermingham: A sudden thought has occurred to me; perhaps my hon. Friend will tell me, from his vast experience, how to solve it. What if there is a vote in this Chamber and a vote in that Chamber at the same time?

Dr. Ladyman: My hon. Friend has clearly not read the report; there will not be any Divisions in the other Chamber. However, when we review the experiment, we should consider ways of allowing controversial subjects to be debated there. The experiment should not end simply with consideration of whether we continue with a parallel Chamber. If we think that it has been a success,

we should consider whether to extend it, introduce controversy and schedule Divisions in two separate Chambers on the same evening.

The proposal is only an experiment. It would be a relatively minor change. I do not believe that it is the fundamental shift in importance from this Chamber that other hon. Members are suggesting. It is a way in which to enhance this Chamber and our debate—a means by which we may debate some subjects that will make our constituents sit up and take notice once more, instead of ignoring us as they do at the moment. *[Interruption.]* Opposition Members can laugh as much as they like, but their antics are the reason why people do not want to report the proceedings in this Chamber any more. The proposals are a way of addressing some of those concerns.

9.9 pm

Mr. Nicholas Winterton (Macclesfield): I hope that the hon. Member for South Thanet (Dr. Ladyman) is not going to spoil what this report says. There will be debates in what I would prefer to call the Commons Committee rather than sittings in Westminster Hall. That would clearly indicate that that Chamber, although part of this Chamber, was subordinate to it.

The Leader of the House was right to emphasise—it was emphasised too by my right hon. Friend the Member for North–West Hampshire (Sir G. Young)—that all matters debated in the Commons Committee would have been agreed across the Floor of the House and that votes would not take place. The experiment that I think the House will decide should go ahead is based on the Australian experience. I must remind the hon. Gentleman that votes do not take place in that Chamber either.

Dr. Ladyman: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Winterton: I will give way once to the hon. Gentleman.

Dr. Ladyman: I want to clarify my position. I fully accept that the experiment being proposed is exactly as the hon. Gentleman has explained, and I am delighted about that. I am merely saying that, if when we look at the results of the experiment we think it has been a success, we may then feel that we might like to consider extending it.

Mr. Winterton: I hope—I say this both as a Conservative Member and as a member of the Modernisation Committee—that our Chairman, the Leader of the House, would not seek to present proposals that would take us down that path. She nods, which suggests that she would not want that.

I enjoyed the speech of the hon. Member for Burnley (Mr. Pike), who is also a member of the Modernisation Committee. He made a good point. The right hon. Member for Ashton–under–Lyne (Mr. Sheldon), who chairs the Liaison Committee, is present. It is vital for that Committee to play a pivotal role in deciding what Select Committee reports are debated in the sittings in Westminster Hall or what I shall again call the Commons Committee. We must keep the decision away from Government, Opposition and the usual channels if Select Committees are to retain and maintain their integrity, and their authority to hold the Government of the day to account and scrutinise the success or otherwise of their management of the country.

The hon. Member for Milton Keynes, South–West (Dr. Starkey) and I agree on one or two elements in the report. One thing that she highlighted was that the video produced by the Australian Main Committee, which was viewed by all members of the Modernisation Committee, did nothing to sell the experiment to the House. I suspect that, if other Members of Parliament had seen the video, more of those who are enthused by what they read in the Modernisation Committee report would take a different view. It was boring beyond words. Let me tell my right hon. Friend the Member for Bromley and Chislehurst (Mr. Forth) that only the required quorum was there to take part in what was a very turgid debate.

The House ignores the views of the hon. Member for Crewe and Nantwich (Mrs. Dunwoody) at its peril. Let me say, as a Conservative Member, that she is an immensely impressive politician.

Mrs. Dunwoody: The hon. Gentleman is doing my reputation no good.

Mr. Winterton: The hon. Lady may say that, but she is highly regarded, and I believe that her understanding of democracy and the way in which the House operates is second to none. Her earlier contribution was very helpful.

I make my speech wearing two hats. I am a member of the Modernisation Committee; I also have the honour and privilege of chairing the Procedure Committee. Many of the matters with which the Modernisation Committee is dealing are also part of the responsibility of the Procedure Committee. Wearing my modernisation hat, I am principally concerned about the primacy, the integrity, the sovereignty, the role and the authority of the House of Commons—of this Chamber. What worries me is that the House is being bypassed in so much of what I see going on. I do not wish to make any reference to rulings and utterances that you, Madam Speaker, have delivered from the Chair, but the importance of the Chamber must never be understated.

Many people say that there is too much legislation and never enough time to debate it all. I say from some experience in the House that there is too much legislation and too little debate. We should have more debate. That is why I personally warmly support the proposals in the Modernisation Committee's report that we should have more genuine debates in the House. Whether they are on the Floor of this Chamber, or in the Grand Committee Room—the Commons Committee—is a matter for debate.

Mr. Forth: Given that my hon. Friend shared my view that, usually, very few Members would be in the alternative Chamber, how would that enhance the quality of debate overall in the Palace of Westminster?

Mr. Winterton: I will come to that, so I ask my right hon. Friend to be patient.

I support another proposition that the Modernisation Committee has put forward: there should be more pre-legislative scrutiny. If that takes place, better legislation will come before the House and less time will be spent in Standing Committee, during remaining stages or in the Committee of the whole House. Therefore, certain pluses are coming out of the report.

[Mr. Winterton]

My right hon. Friend the Member for Bromley and Chislehurst has rightly referred to the attendance in the Chamber. It is something of which I am ashamed. When we are televised and people see just a handful of Members in the House—on either side—people get the wrong impression. I almost wish that I were able to be here, but, as you know, Madam Speaker, my other duties in the House rightly take me elsewhere, whether it is—although it does not meet when the House is sitting—the Modernisation Committee, or the Procedure Committee, some of whose members are in the House and hoping to speak. We meet concurrently with the House and do an important job, although people looking on debates in this Chamber would not appreciate that fact.

I raise a matter that I have raised with the Leader of the House before. There is a problem in Committees in achieving a quorum. On two occasions, we have had to cancel an important Procedure Committee sitting to discuss the procedural consequences of devolution because we could not achieve a quorum of members to enable us to sit. If we have bad attendances in the Chamber and find it difficult to man Committees, clearly, we will need to take account of the problems that will arise because of another Committee, or another sitting in Westminster hall, which will be concurrent with what is going on in the House itself.

Mr. Brady: I wonder whether my hon. Friend would bear it in mind that sittings in Westminster Hall could contribute to the problems of Select Committees in achieving a quorum.

Mr. Winterton: Indeed. That is why I have raised the issue. I have raised it in the Modernisation Committee, through correspondence with the Leader of the House and, for that matter, correspondence with the Whips, of both the Government and Opposition parties. The Leader of the House has taken the matter on board. Clearly, the House will have to take it into account in reaching a decision tonight.

I want to be positive in respect of the role that I play as Chairman of the Procedure Committee. The Committee is sympathetic to the Modernisation Committee's proposal as it provides more time for debates, which all hon. Members may attend. That is particularly pertinent as devolution will necessitate some changes in the way in which the House operates and conducts its business.

One of the problems that the Procedure Committee has had to consider in its inquiry on the procedural consequences of devolution has been the future of Grand Committees, which currently comprise a set of the House's Committees. As many hon. Members will be aware, before devolution, such Committees provided a mechanism whereby hon. Members representing parts of the United Kingdom with distinctive identities—Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland—could present their views. Now, the new devolved legislatures will themselves be able to make representations to the United Kingdom Government. Therefore—in my view, and that of my Committee—there is no need for such double representation.

None the less, devolution should not mean that there should be no debate at Westminster on matters relating to Scotland or Wales. My Committee and I believe that many of the matters previously referred to Grand Committees—such as the implications of the Budget for Wales—will remain proper and desirable subjects for debate in the House. However, as our report states, the Procedure Committee was attracted to the principle

"that Members from all parts of the United Kingdom should be able to participate in debates held in the United Kingdom Parliament."

I believe that continuation of Grand Committees would undermine that principle. We therefore propose making some savings—which I hope will enable hon. Members who sat on the Grand Committees to be available elsewhere.

The increased opportunity for debate offered by Westminster Hall means that debates on matters relating to Scotland, Wales or—dare I add it—even England could be taken in a forum in which all hon. Members could participate, be it in the Commons Committee, in Westminster Hall, or the Chamber itself. Indeed, the Procedure Committee was so interested in the proposal that it rushed out its "Second Interim Report on the Procedural Consequences of Devolution", so that the House could have notice of its thinking before any early debate on the subject that we are now debating. Today, the Committee published its full report on the "Procedural Consequences of Devolution".

It is important that we should seize the opportunity offered by Westminster Hall if United Kingdom Members are to have the opportunity to learn from one another's experiences. I wonder how many Labour Members know that, currently, no English Member other than a Minister may participate in the Scottish Grand Committee, and that only five may join the Welsh Grand Committee. Those debates may, in principle, be read after the event, but I should be surprised if they had a wide circulation.

If devolution results in things being done better—as they may be—in Scotland and in Wales, all hon. Members should have the chance to hear about them and to discuss the Scottish or the Welsh experience. Similarly—as I am sure that you, Madam Speaker, will be aware—policies on reserved matters affecting the highlands may have similar effects on remote parts of England and of Wales. Hon. Members from all countries may have an interest in debating those matters.

The Procedure Committee recommended that

"once devolved government is in place and for the period of the experiment with the sittings in Westminster Hall, the Grand Committees be suspended."

Mr. Clive Efford (Eltham): Will the hon. Gentleman confirm, having participated in the Procedure Committee's discussions on the issue, that Committee members were concerned that no precedence should be given in the new Committee to debates that would previously have been held in Grand Committees, and that those debates should take their place alongside other debates in seeking to use the additional opportunity?

Mr. Winterton: The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right. He also plays an important part in the business of the Procedure Committee. I congratulate him on his regular attendance of the Committee, thereby enabling us to maintain a quorum.

I believe that the House will have to be very careful in taking the decision that it will take today. Some dramatic changes are proposed that may have an unfortunate effect on the integrity, sovereignty, role and authority of the House.

Like the hon. Member for Crewe and Nantwich, I am concerned about the hemicycle. I would have much preferred a similar layout to this Chamber. The cost is estimated at £870,000. I think that it will be much more. It is likely to be close to £1 million. The example of the new parliamentary building across the road shows how contracts can overrun. I am concerned about our ability to find such a large sum at the drop of a hat. I remind the hon. Member for Burnley that the money is being brought forward from 2002-06, when the expenditure would otherwise have been incurred. We are finding a great deal of money to carry out the experiment. I hope that the Leader of the House will assure me that the amount spent during the experiment will be kept to a minimum. Only if the experiment is a success should we proceed with the full expenditure.

Mrs. Beckett: I am not entirely sure what the hon. Gentleman is asking, but he knows the position. It is proposed that work on the Grand Committee Room that was scheduled should be brought forward. Any further expenditure should be kept to a minimum. He will remember that I asked about the need for the additional expenditure. The House authorities have undertaken to see whether it is possible to provide all the funds that would be required within the leeway for this year.

Mr. Winterton: I thank the right hon. Lady for that clarification. I remember her raising the matter and I know that she shares my concern that in the experimental period the expenditure should be kept to a minimum, although we disagreed about the layout in the Grand Committee Room.

I shall consider deeply which way to vote, but I have a nasty feeling that my traditionalism may prevail.

9.27 pm

Mr. Keith Darvill (Upminster): I am in favour of the motion. Since being elected to the House, I have had the privilege of sitting on the Procedure Committee, which has been very active. It is good to follow the hon. Member for Macclesfield (Mr. Winterton), who chairs the Committee.

As well as the procedural consequences of devolution, the Procedure Committee has considered resource accounting and budgeting, which has not been mentioned so far. It is clear from the Committee's detailed examination of the issue that considerable additional information will be available to Select Committees to enable them to examine the finances of the Departments that they shadow.

We have already heard statistics on the number of Select Committee reports that are not considered. With the availability of that additional information, it is even more important that the reports are examined in the Chamber or in Westminster Hall. If not, the considerable work that is undertaken by hon. Members will seem wasted, as will the benefit of the close examination and scrutiny of the Executive that Select Committees provide.

I agree with most of the recommendations. The main benefit that will flow from a positive decision this evening is the additional time that will be made available to debate Select Committee reports. Paragraph 27 of the report says:

"we see Westminster Hall as a forum which will provide additional opportunities for select committees."

Many hours are devoted to Select Committees by hon. Members. To debate only 10 per cent. of reports in any one year shows that the House is not functioning properly and not holding the Executive to account. This is not a new matter, as the Liaison Committee underlined the need for further examination of Select Committees in 1997. This theme has developed as the role of Select Committees has evolved.

The British constitution is slow to change. The reform of the House of Lords has been agonisingly slow, and has taken the best part of this century. The evolution of Select Committees has moved at a faster pace. We are at a time of considerable change, with the procedural consequences of devolution and resource accounting and budgeting. Failing to allow Select Committee reports in particular to be examined as they should be means that we are not doing our constituents or ourselves any favours. I believe that not only Select Committees but Green Papers and other matters should be examined.

Mr. Bermingham: Just to prove to the Liberal Democrats that I have read the report, I should point out that one of the problems is that people might say "Object" to Select Committee reports being debated in the new Chamber. It might be as well for the Government to take away that blockage. From experience, Select Committee reports and Green Papers are not debated, and will not be debated, if three people—or whatever the quorum is—simply say "Object".

Mr. Darvill: My hon. Friend raises an important point, and the procedures are evolving. If hon. Members do not want the system to work, they can stop it. If so, the trial will not have worked, and it will be for us to come back and consider the matter. I hope that Members will not take those measures to thwart the will of the House, and that the real benefits that can be obtained from this experiment will be delivered.

Mr. Stunell: Could I draw the hon. Gentleman's attention to the fact that the provision to object relates only to Government-proposed business and would not apply to Select Committee reports, meaning that the intervention by the hon. Member for St. Helens, South (Mr. Bermingham) was unfortunately mistaken?

Mr. Darvill: I thank the hon. Gentleman for highlighting that point, and I hope that the House supports the measures tonight.

9.33 pm

Mr. William Ross (East Londonderry): I am somewhat reluctantly prepared to give this proposal a cautious welcome. One of the reasons for that is that it appears that, by and large, legislation will stay in the Chamber. I am cautious because of a number of proposals in the report, including that we should have a semi-circular arrangement. I thought that we had the perfectly sound principle of cross-Bench seating to allow those who wished to sit on the fence to sit squarely on it. I suppose that the Government, with their majority, will ram this through the House—as they have done with so many things—and we will wind up with that arrangement.

When matters are brought to the House, I often wonder what the real intentions of the Government are. I have been here for a number of years, and I have never yet

[Mr. William Ross]

seen a Government making changes to the procedures to be helpful to the Opposition or to Back Benchers. I do not think that that is the intention in this case, either.

I am somewhat curious about the type of debate that we may have. Some of us will want to probe, to ask questions and to be more constructive than is sometimes the case across this Chamber, but others will be doing a publicity job for their own area to boost their standing with their constituents. We all understand that that will go on; the question is how on earth we are to keep it under control.

Guillotine motions have been an increasing feature of life in recent years. Does the move to Westminster Hall mean that there will be fewer of those and that there will be more public debate in the main Chamber, allowing all hon. Members to air their concerns, or will all such business move too, giving us an opportunity to speak there that has been denied us here?

The Leader of the House said that she thought that there would be better scrutiny of legislation and of Government. How are the Government to be called to account in the Committee? Will those who take part in the debates be able to send for papers and persons, as in Select Committees?

Mrs. Beckett: I think that there has been a slight misunderstanding, as I did not suggest that the new Committee would provide greater opportunity for scrutiny of legislation as such. I spoke merely of enhancing parliamentary scrutiny as a whole, in that there will be opportunities for hon. Members to hold Ministers to account in debate.

Mr. Ross: I am grateful for that explanation, because it means that whenever we do not get an answer in Westminster Hall, we can bring the matter back here and put pressure on the Government by asking more questions.

The Government clearly believe that the change will not be as popular as the trailers have suggested. The fact that a quorum of three is deemed sufficient says a lot about the importance that we are prepared to attach to the new institution.

I know, and all but the most recent Members should know, that Governments hate debate, as it is very dangerous for them; that is why they always try to restrict it. They have a problem with legislation because they cannot retreat; they have to press on, and the longer the debate goes on, the more likely it is that weaknesses and imperfections will be exposed. We saw the result of that only last week.

We should always look for a longer time scale in legislation. I would much prefer to be in this Chamber. I would like the general public to have time to examine legislation as it goes through the House on a much longer time scale. Time is the vital consideration for the House; it is the enemy of Government, who know that Back Benchers will make use of it. The restriction of time is the weapon that Governments use to get their way before people have properly thought through what they are doing. We should consider how on earth we can extend the opportunities for debate.

The proposal has some advantages for minor parties and for those who want to raise issues that may be minor in the national context but are of local or regional importance. Northern Ireland Members will be glad of the opportunity to have more Northern Ireland business discussed in the precincts of the Palace of Westminster.

Unlike some Opposition Members, I welcome the proposal to move the Wednesday morning debates to Westminster Hall. The loss of the chance for the public to see this place on a Wednesday morning has been a loss to the community at large, and I hope that the morning will be free again, because the more the general public can come here, the better for democracy.

I regret the fact that we do not have the late-night debates that we used to have. That is a great loss to the community as a whole.

9.39 pm

Helen Jackson (Sheffield, Hillsborough): I am pleased to have had the privilege of being a member of the Modernisation Committee. That is not because the word "modernisation" makes me think, "Oh, great, we can change everything tomorrow", nor is it because—as my hon. Friend the Member for Crewe and Nantwich (Mrs. Dunwoody) did not suggest—I am the sort of Member who thinks, "Modernisation? Oh dear. What can I do to prevent any change in what happens in the House?" I believe strongly that it is good for every institution, whether a family, big business or Parliament, to consider how it is fulfilling its role and how it wants to change. I also know from experience that nothing focuses the mind more than changing the furniture, moving to a different room, changing the bedroom that a child sleeps in or changing the room that someone uses as an office. That is why this has been a constructive and interesting debate.

Using the same analogy, the usual excuse given for not changing something is cost. There is money in future budgets for upgrading the Grand Committee Room in Westminster Hall. If the House accepts the proposals before us today, I would be delighted to bring that money forward so that Westminster Hall, which is at the historical heart of this parliamentary building, can be made into a room of which we can be really proud. Some of us had the privilege of seeing it laid out as it would be, and we could also imagine the enhanced lift for the disabled—the current method of getting disabled people up to those rooms is not very dignified. The costs would be minimal. We are spending £250 million on Portcullis house and we are talking about much less than £1 million for a development that would enhance the Houses of Parliament as a whole.

I agree with those hon. Members who have said that what happens in this Chamber is of paramount importance. These proposals can only enhance the Chamber. I agree with the right hon. Member for North-West Hampshire (Sir G. Young) who believes—as you do, Madam Speaker—that ministerial statements should be made to the House and not on Radio 4. These proposals will leave the Chamber free for Ministers to make their statements—*[Interruption.]* I agree with Opposition Members, who are laughing, that that is the correct approach.

Attendance in the Chamber has been mentioned, but it falls when the Chamber is abused. I find all-night sittings silly, time wasting and bad for the brain. They do nothing to enhance the reputation of the Chamber and a lot of silliness is often spoken during them.

Mrs. Dunwoody: I hope that my hon. Friend will not think that I am being unkind if I say that a lot of silliness is often spoken earlier in the day in the Chamber.

Helen Jackson: A lot of silliness is spoken in many parts of this building all through the day.

I strongly support the early, radical recommendation of the Modernisation Committee that the majority of Bills should be timetabled. I refer hon. Members back to last week, when we talked all night on an issue that aroused strong feelings on all sides. Hardly anyone was listening, and the media were not interested. When the debate was rescheduled in prime time on a timetable motion, good points were made by hon. Members of all parties. It was an excellent debate and, as it happened, the Government won the vote. People were able to listen to the arguments, and the time chosen was appropriate for discussion of an issue that interested everyone in the House. There was no question of poor attendance last Thursday.

It is within our power to examine the way in which we discuss legislation and to ensure that this Chamber is used to discuss key issues in which everyone is interested. The new Chamber in Westminster Hall will release time in which this Chamber can be used better.

I do not want to go over what has been said about the benefits to be gained from the proposals for Westminster Hall. From my time on the former Select Committee on the Environment, I know that discussion of Select Committee reports in this Chamber either happens too late, when the issue concerned has gone off the boil, or does not happen at all.

The extra time that will be allowed for private Members' business means that the expertise that Back Benchers bring from their former professions and lives will be used more effectively. Also, although it may be heresy to some people, I think that it might be appropriate to move the Wednesday morning sittings to Westminster Hall as a pilot experiment. Wednesday is the most popular day for the public to come to Parliament, as Prime Minister's Questions are held on that day. At present there is no opportunity for people to see the Chamber in the morning.

I agree with what has been said about debates on foreign affairs and estimates. However, I agree with paragraph 17 of the report's board of management memorandum, which expresses the hope that use of the second Chamber for Government business will not be ruled out. I shall be interested in whether discussion of some delegated legislation may be more suitably allocated to Westminster Hall.

In addition, some of the early discussions of specialist matters arising from Green Papers may give rise to debates that are wider and better thought out than is possible here, where the lack of available time means that they are squeezed for space. I also want to add my voice to those hon. Members who have endorsed the idea that the Westminster Hall Chamber will be distinctly different. The format for debates will be different, and I welcome that.

Those hon. Members who are worried about whether the new forum will take off are right to ask whether the media will be interested. In the previous Parliament, I spent a lot of time on matters to do with water and the environment. The members of the media interested in those subjects tended to be the environmental correspondents and the specialist media, who did not enjoy the luxury of the facilities extended to the Lobby correspondents.

That may not be popular with the Lobby correspondents, who like to feel that Parliament is about gossip, cut and thrust, and Prime Minister's Question Time—but the specialist media should be given enhanced facilities in the House, and this is an opportunity to provide them. This proposal could be good for Parliament, helping to persuade the public that we are not simply concerned with Prime Minister's Question Time, while the Chamber is otherwise empty. It should show that we are concerned to debate the key issues of the day, that all arguments are heard and that we are not just party hacks. It should show that whatever party we belong to, we are interested in raising arguments, listening to each other and discussing matters.

I hope that Westminster Hall will provide a fresh and responsible approach. The reform is cost effective, brilliantly using a part of the House that embodies the heart of the old parliamentary buildings.

9.51 pm

Mr. David Maclean (Penrith and The Border): I listened to the hon. Member for Sheffield, Hillsborough (Helen Jackson) with increasing incredulity. She said that decamping the House of Commons—not a Committee—on certain days to a poky room above the cafeteria off Westminster Hall would somehow enhance the status of the Chamber. Even if that poky room has a £1 million refurbishment, decamping to it will not enhance the status of the House of Commons. I oppose the report because I believe that it will, yet again, diminish the status of the House and of Madam Speaker. There is no need for it.

My incredulity increased when the hon. Lady suggested that if a parallel Chamber met elsewhere, there would somehow be time for Ministers to make statements to the House. Ha! That beggars belief. The diminution of the status of this House has come not from evolutionary change but, over the past two years, from revolutionary change. Prime Minister's Question Time has been arbitrarily changed, without consultation with Madam Speaker. The other place is being destroyed although we have been given no model with which to replace it. Again and again, statements are made outside the House. Today's was another example. All that diminishes the status of this place.

I do not believe that there is any need for a parallel Chamber to debate the issues mentioned. Time is available in this House if we wish to use it. My right hon. Friend the Member for Bromley and Chislehurst (Mr. Forth) has pointed out that we are rising a day early for the Whitsun recess. There was an attempt to give us an extra week's holiday before the Easter recess, and we took three days of it. Last summer, the recess was one of the longest in history. There is time to debate issues if the House wants to do so.

[Mr. David Maclean]

Fridays have also been reduced and are used purely for private Members' business. If there is an overwhelming demand for Adjournment debates, let hon. Members slot in 10 of them on a Friday. At half an hour each, we could easily do so.

Mrs. Beckett: I have forborne to correct the many Conservative Members who have referred to the changes on Fridays. However, I recall that those changes resulted from the Jopling report, under the previous Government. They were nothing to do with the present Government.

Mr. Maclean: I accept that those changes were consequences of the Jopling report, but not everything in that report was to the benefit of the House. If there is a demand for more Adjournment debates, let them be held on a Friday, or let them continue to be held in the Chamber on a Wednesday morning. Let us not detract even further from the status of the House.

I will share a little anecdote with the House, which I think is instructive. When I was made an Environment Minister in 1992, we held the presidency of the European Union. We held an informal ministerial meeting here. We arranged a nice hotel to meet all the Ministers, which was the normal practice. I was waiting on the steps to greet the German Minister—one of the most important—who turned up in the British Government ministerial Rover Sterling, which we had allocated to him. The hotel flunkies jumped to help him with his bags. At that moment, a fleet of Daimlers rolled up. The hotel flunkies dropped the German Minister's bags, rushed to the Daimlers and treated the occupants like royalty. Of course, they were the civil servants from the Commission, who had decided to hire their own fleet. The point is this—as someone in the hotel said when we protested about the treatment of the German Minister—"If you drive around like royalty, you'll be treated like royalty."

You are the Speaker of this House of Commons, Madam Speaker. If we move to a Committee room at the other side of Westminster Hall not to hold a Committee there but to hold what is effectively a sitting of the House of Commons, and it is chaired not by Madam Speaker but by a Deputy Speaker and by other Assistant Speakers, we will again be diminishing the status of the Chamber.

Dr. Starkey: Does the right hon. Gentleman agree that the logic of his statement is that when Madam Speaker is, regrettably, unable to be in charge of the Chamber and one of her deputies is substituting, the status of this Chamber is somehow diminished?

Mr. Maclean: That was not my point at all. This is the Chamber—*[Interruption.]* My point is that if the House of Commons is no longer meeting in this Chamber, which is adequate to hold most of the Members of the House, but decides to move to a Committee Room above the cafeteria on the other side of Westminster Hall, where Madam Speaker will never be in the Chair—at best it will be a Deputy Speaker—that will be perceived by the media and others as a much lesser form of House of Commons, as indeed it will be because, at most, 51 Members—

Mr. Nicholas Winterton: I am a little concerned about my right hon. Friend's derogatory remarks because I might be one of those hon. Members in the Chair.

Mr. Maclean: My hon. Friend has many talents and qualities, but he is not the Speaker of the House of Commons. Our debates in this Chamber can be presided over by the Speaker; our debates in the Room above the café will be presided over by, at most, a Deputy Speaker. That in itself is another small but significant diminution in the status of this Chamber.

Comments have been made about the furniture. Listening to some hon. Ladies on the Labour Benches telling us that the furniture, the design of the room and the colours are important, I thought that we were about to have another lecture on interior decorating and design.

The hon. Member for Crewe and Nantwich (Mrs. Dunwoody) made an excellent speech. She proved that there can be complete agreement across the Floor of this House. I agree with everything that the hon. Lady said, both in her speech and in her interventions. We did not need to sit in some cosy hemicycle to come to that agreement. The hon. Member for East Londonderry (Mr. Ross) talked about a semi-circle, but it is a hemicycle and there is a big difference, I understand.

There is no need for this proposal because there is ample time if we want it. We must puncture a few myths. Hon. Members say that there is great demand for Select Committee reports to be debated. Let us be honest. Who are we kidding? The only demand comes from some of the members of the Select Committees, who want to take over another Chamber of the House to debate the same report that they have spent weeks discussing in the first place.

Select Committee reports are important, not because they will be debated three weeks, six weeks or six months later but because, on the day of publication—if they have not been leaked—the Committees can hold the Government to account. At that stage, they can cause the Government some hurt or injury, put them on the back foot and make them defend themselves. That is when Select Committee reports matter, not when they are debated in the room above the café six months later.

It is clear from what Labour Members said that they regard endless Adjournment debates as a major role for the new Chamber. Let us be honest again: Adjournment debates do not hold the Government to account. No Minister is terrified of them. I cannot recall ever swotting up for days worrying about an Adjournment debate; no one in this Government sweats about them either. Adjournment debates are loved by all Members, and we put in for them for one good reason: they are another justification for press releases because we can say that we raised an issue on the Floor of the House of Commons and give out a copy of our very important speeches to an almost packed House.

Let us be honest. Our press releases are based on our questions and speeches. As we cannot get into many of the important debates, Adjournment debates are another legitimate avenue. If hon. Members want endless Adjournment debates, I say once again and in conclusion,

let them be held on Friday or Wednesday morning, but do not set up yet another Chamber that is supposed to be this House in miniature on the other side of Westminster Hall.

I am sorry, Madam Speaker: when I used the words "in conclusion", I told a slight untruth. My final point concerns the furniture. I notice—I think in schematic 5 of the hemicycle that we are urged to agree to tonight—that there is provision for a pulpit. We now know where the Prime Minister will sit.

10.1 pm

Mr. Tony McNulty (Harrow, East): I draw the attention of the right hon. Member for Penrith and The Border (Mr. Maclean) to paragraph 50. Should he venture into Westminster Hall, he will find that the Deputy Speaker and his colleagues have the power to discontinue a speech on the grounds of tedious repetition and irrelevance. Perhaps he should stay out altogether.

I have a few points, but I will not speak fully in favour of the report. This evening has been an example of how badly the House of Commons does these things. The hon. Member for Macclesfield (Mr. Winterton) eloquently discussed the Procedure Committee's report on the consequences of devolution. At the same time, we had the Modernisation Committee's report on finding extra time above the police café in Westminster Hall. It would have made more sense if both Committees had met so that the Procedure Committee could have given its views on the consequences of devolution and the Modernisation Committee its views on finding more time for debate. A joint report could have been produced for the House, rather than discussing the Modernisation Committee report—I call it the Tinkering Committee—and then discussing the Procedure Committee report. That is daft.

I do not like members of the Modernisation Committee who wax lyrical with hyperbole and revolutionary fervour about what is nothing more than tinkering. I do not like many aspects of the proposals. I do not know how to overcome it but I do not like the fact that only 51 Members can get into the Room. What happens if 53 want to come? Will the Westminster Hall sittings be stopped and brought back to the main Chamber? The right hon. Member for Bromley and Chislehurst (Mr. Forth) probably has at least 50 acquaintances, if not friends, whom he could persuade to fill that Chamber every now and then to avoid debate. The modernisation debate is not served by hyperbole and revolutionary fervour when we are talking only of a couple more hours of debate elsewhere.

I fundamentally disagree with the report about the House becoming a museum again on Wednesdays. Like other hon. Members, I take tours round, but above all, this must be a working Chamber. Its work must be paramount. I am disappointed that Wednesday mornings are excluded. When the private Members' Bill process is reformed, I should like such proceedings to be held on Wednesdays so that some of my northern comrades and Opposition colleagues could pop along and see what the process is all about. I come into the House every Friday, as do some other Members.

The proposals are not revolutionary. It is a shame that the Procedure Committee and the Modernisation Committee did not hold a joint meeting. We need to address the issue of furniture. I am not a hemispheric—*[Interruption.]* I am hemispheric, but I am not a hemispheric. The notion that, if we arrange the furniture, the politics will change—that the adversarial will go and consensus will arrive—is absolute nonsense. Hon. Members should consider the Westminster city council chamber or the Harrow council chamber. I was a member of Harrow council and I made pretty sure that there was no such thing as consensus, unless, as leader of the Labour group, the consensus was what the Labour group said it should be. In that sense, I accept consensus.

Let us not run a mile. The ideas are fine. The idea that there should be another Chamber in order that we can have more discussion is fine. If the amendments had been tabled by a Member whom I preferred, I might have supported them; I cannot, in all conscience, go into the Lobby to support an amendment tabled by the right hon. Member for Bromley and Chislehurst. However, as a modernising party or a modernising Chamber, we should not run away with the notion that the proposals are revolutionary. For God's sake, will the Modernisation Committee start being a modernising Committee and stop being a tinkering Committee that goes along at a snail's pace? The Committee is not even Fabian; it goes along at a snail's pace—at a dead snail's pace. Let us modernise properly, but scrap the hyperbole.

10.6 pm

Mr. Graham Brady (Altrincham and Sale, West): I am pleased to follow the hon. Member for Harrow, East (Mr. McNulty). I nearly spoiled matters by introducing a note of consensus, even though that is not my preference in politics either. The hon. Gentleman saved me from that, however. I oppose the motion, but support the amendment tabled by my right hon. Friend the Member for Bromley and Chislehurst (Mr. Forth) and my hon. Friend the Member for Macclesfield (Mr. Winterton)—not only because the amendment could have no finer pedigree, but because any Members who take seriously the role of this Chamber must accept the arguments that have been advanced for the amendment. Those arguments include the following: that the meetings in Westminster Hall must be considered to be a Committee of the House and not in any way equivalent to what goes on in this Chamber; that we should hold Wednesday debates in this Chamber and that their removal would diminish the value of what goes on here; and that the seating in the new Committee Room should be on the same model as the seating in this Chamber. I have never disagreed with Labour Members simply because they sit opposite me—nor have I necessarily agreed with Members on the Opposition Benches because they sit on the same Benches as I do. Some of my hon. Friends have made the same point. However, the crucial point is that the seating arrangement matters. That is why it is essential that we retain the existing plan. The reason is that it assists scrutiny and makes it less likely that there will be cover-up and fudge. It makes proper questioning and debate more likely.

Most important, I support the amendments tabled by my right hon. Friend the Member for Bromley and Chislehurst that relate to the quorum. To suggest that there is a huge demand for sittings in Westminster Hall when the quorum is to be fixed at three gives the lie to the whole proposal.

Mr. Pike: In this Chamber, the quorum is only invoked when a vote is called. There is no stated quorum, so the quorum is often only three—or even less.

Mr. Brady: I am well aware of that point. I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for raising the matter. The proceedings in this Chamber might be improved if we had a quorum. The point demonstrates the problem in terms of the status of what we do and the attention that is paid to it. The issue is more about the quality of our proceedings and the genuine, intrinsic interest of debates—which sometimes draw only a small number of Members—than about the amount of time in which we have to deal with business.

The role of Select Committees has been discussed by several hon. Members—including the hon. Member for Burnley (Mr. Pike). It has been pointed out that many of those Committees have difficulty in achieving a quorum for their meetings. Again, that demonstrates the fact that Members do not always bother to turn up to debate important matters or to attend important meetings. In considering the new Committee in Westminster Hall, we are also led to the inescapable conclusion that there will be even more difficulties for Select Committees, which, in many cases, are struggling to achieve a quorum, when the limited number of occasions on which they can currently meet will conflict further with sittings of this House. That will cause significant problems for the more active Members of Parliament.

Some have suggested that the new Committee might serve as some sort of job creation scheme for Labour Members who currently have little to do, but I would counter that by arguing that many hon. Members who currently do rather a lot will find it impossible to participate fully in the additional work. Those who are involved in Standing Committees and Select Committees might want to participate in some of the meetings in Westminster Hall, but they will be unable to do so.

It being three hours after the commencement of proceedings on the motion, MADAM SPEAKER *put the Questions necessary to dispose of those proceedings, pursuant to Order [21 May.]*

Amendment proposed: in line 3, at end add:

"except for paragraphs 17 and 24, and considers that the new sittings should be known as the Commons Committee; that the Wednesday morning sitting devoted to private members' business should not be transferred to Westminster Hall; and that the seating plan to be adopted should be as set out in Appendix 2 of the Report."—[*Mr. Forth.*]

Question put, That the amendment be made:—

The House proceeded to a Division—

Mr. Robathan: On a point of order, Madam Speaker. We were categorically assured at the start of the debate—I believe that you were present—that this was not a payroll vote and that Government Members were not whipped. Is it in order for Government Whips to act as Tellers on the vote?

Madam Speaker: What Government Whips do is nothing to do with me. Hon. Members are free to use whichever Lobby they want—indeed, I am honoured because several hon. Members have, as they passed by the Chair, asked which way they should vote. That has never happened to me before.

The House having divided: Ayes 43, Noes 144.

Division No. 196] **[10.11 pm**

AYES

Amess, David
Barnes, Harry
Bell, Martin *(Tatton)*
Bennett, Andrew F
Blunt, Crispin
Brady, Graham
Burnett, John
Clwyd, Ann
Colvin, Michael
Davis, Rt Hon David *(Haltemprice & Howden)*
Donohoe, Brian H
Duncan Smith, Iain
Dunwoody, Mrs Gwyneth
Flight, Howard
Fox, Dr Liam
Fraser, Christopher
Gibb, Nick
Gill, Christopher
Gillan, Mrs Cheryl
Green, Damian
Hammond, Philip
Howarth, Gerald *(Aldershot)*
Leigh, Edward
Lidington, David
McIntosh, Miss Anne
Mawhinney, Rt Hon Sir Brian
Nicholls, Patrick
Öpik, Lembit
Pickles, Eric
Randall, John
Robathan, Andrew
Ross, William *(E Londy)*
Smith, Sir Robert *(W Ab'd'ns)*
Smyth, Rev Martin *(Belfast S)*
Swayne, Desmond
Wardle, Charles
Waterson, Nigel
Webb, Steve
Wells, Bowen
Whittingdale, John
Widdecombe, Rt Hon Miss Ann
Winterton, Mrs Ann *(Congleton)*
Winterton, Nicholas *(Macclesfield)*

Tellers for the Ayes:
Mr. Eric Forth and
Mr. David Maclean.

NOES

Ainsworth, Robert *(Cov'try NE)*
Allan, Richard
Allen, Graham
Atkins, Charlotte
Baker, Norman
Ballard, Jackie
Beckett, Rt Hon Mrs Margaret
Begg, Miss Anne
Beith, Rt Hon A J
Betts, Clive
Blackman, Liz
Blears, Ms Hazel
Bradley, Keith *(Withington)*
Bradshaw, Ben
Breed, Colin
Bruce, Malcolm *(Gordon)*
Burden, Richard
Cabom, Rt Hon Richard
Campbell, Mrs Anne *(C'bridge)*
Campbell, Rt Hon Menzies *(NE Fife)*
Campbell–Savours, Dale
Caplin, Ivor
Clark, Rt Hon Dr David *(S Shields)*
Clark, Dr Lynda *(Edinburgh Pentlands)*
Clarke, Charles *(Norwich S)*
Clarke, Eric *(Midlothian)*
Clelland, David
Coaker, Vernon
Cohen, Harry
Connarty, Michael
Cotter, Brian
Cranston, Ross
Cunliffe, Lawrence
Curtis–Thomas, Mrs Claire
Darvill, Keith
Davey, Edward *(Kingston)*
Davey, Valerie *(Bristol W)*
Dawson, Hilton
Dean, Mrs Janet
Dowd, Jim
Drew, David
Eagle, Angela *(Wallasey)*
Eagle, Maria *(L'pool Garston)*
Efford, Clive
Etherington, Bill
Fearn, Ronnie
Fitzpatrick, Jim
Fitzsimons, Lorna
Foster, Michael Jabez *(Hastings)*
Gapes, Mike
George, Bruce *(Walsall S)*
Gilroy, Mrs Linda
Goggins, Paul
Griffiths, Jane *(Reading E)*
Gunnell, John
Hall, Mike *(Weaver Vale)*
Hall, Patrick *(Bedford)*
Hancock, Mike
Hanson, David
Harvey, Nick
Heath, David *(Somerton & Frome)*
Heppell, John
Hope, Phil
Howarth, George *(Knowsley N)*
Hughes, Ms Beverley *(Stretford)*
Hughes, Simon *(Southwark N)*
Hutton, John
Iddon, Dr Brian
Illsley, Eric
Jackson, Helen *(Hillsborough)*
Jamieson, David
Jenkins, Brian
Johnson, Alan *(Hull W & Hessle)*
Johnson, Miss Melanie *(Welwyn Hatfield)*
Jones, Ms Jenny *(Wolverh'ton SW)*
Keeble, Ms Sally
Kemp, Fraser
King, Ms Oona *(Bethnal Green)*
Ladyman, Dr Stephen
Leslie, Christopher
Levitt, Tom
Linton, Martin
Livsey, Richard
Lloyd, Tony *(Manchester C)*

Lock, David
McAvoy, Thomas
Mackinlay, Andrew
McNamara, Kevin
Mactaggart, Fiona
McWalter, Tony
Mahon, Mrs Alice
Marsden, Paul *(Shrewsbury)*
Marshall-Andrews, Robert
Maxton, John
Merron, Gillian
Michie, Bill *(Sheff'ld Heeley)*
Michie, Mrs Ray *(Argyll & Bute)*
Moffatt, Laura
Moran, Ms Margaret
Naysmith, Dr Doug
Oaten, Mark
Olner, Bill
Pickthall, Colin
Pike, Peter L
Pond, Chris
Pope, Greg
Prentice, Ms Bridget *(Lewisham E)*
Prescott, Rt Hon John
Purchase, Ken
Quinn, Lawrie
Rendel, David
Rowlands, Ted
Russell, Bob *(Colchester)*
Salter, Martin
Sanders, Adrian
Savidge, Malcolm
Sheerman, Barry
Short, Rt Hon Clare
Simpson, Alan *(Nottingham S)*
Smith, Jacqui *(Redditch)*
Soley, Clive
Starkey, Dr Phyllis
Stoate, Dr Howard
Stuart, Ms Gisela
Stunell, Andrew
Taylor, Rt Hon Mrs Ann *(Dewsbury)*
Taylor, David *(NW Leics)*
Taylor, Matthew *(Truro)*
Thomas, Gareth R *(Harrow W)*
Tipping, Paddy
Todd, Mark
Tonge, Dr Jenny
Touhig, Don
Turner, Dennis *(Wolverh'ton SE)*
Turner, Dr George *(NW Norfolk)*
Twigg, Derek *(Halton)*
Twigg, Stephen *(Enfield)*
Tyler, Paul
Walley, Ms Joan
Watts, David
Willis, Phil
Winterton, Ms Rosie *(Doncaster C)*
Wright, Dr Tony *(Cannock)*
Young, Rt Hon Sir George

Tellers for the Noes:
Mr. Keith Hill and
Mr. Kevin Hughes.

Question accordingly negatived.

Main Question put:—

The House divided: Ayes 145, Noes 36.

Division No. 197] **[10.24 pm**

AYES

Ainsworth, Robert *(Cov'try NE)*
Allan, Richard
Allen, Graham
Atkins, Charlotte
Baker, Norman
Ballard, Jackie
Beckett, Rt Hon Mrs Margaret
Begg, Miss Anne
Beith, Rt Hon A J
Betts, Clive
Blackman, Liz
Blears, Ms Hazel
Bradley, Keith *(Withington)*
Bradshaw, Ben
Breed, Colin
Bruce, Malcolm *(Gordon)*
Burden, Richard
Cabom, Rt Hon Richard
Campbell, Mrs Anne *(C'bridge)*
Campbell, Rt Hon Menzies *(NE Fife)*
Campbell-Savours, Dale
Caplin, Ivor
Clark, Rt Hon Dr David *(S Shields)*
Clarke, Charles *(Norwich S)*
Clarke, Eric *(Midlothian)*
Clelland, David
Coaker, Vernon
Cohen, Harry
Connarty, Michael
Cotter, Brian
Cranston, Ross
Curtis-Thomas, Mrs Claire
Darvill, Keith
Davey, Edward *(Kingston)*
Davey, Valerie *(Bristol W)*
Dawson, Hilton
Dean, Mrs Janet
Dismore, Andrew
Donohoe, Brian H
Dowd, Jim
Drew, David
Eagle, Angela *(Wallasey)*
Eagle, Maria *(L'pool Garston)*
Efford, Clive
Emery, Rt Hon Sir Peter
Etherington, Bill
Fearn, Ronnie
Fitzpatrick, Jim
Fitzsimons, Lorna
Foster, Michael Jabez *(Hastings)*
Gapes, Mike
George, Bruce *(Walsall S)*
Gilroy, Mrs Linda
Goggins, Paul
Griffiths, Jane *(Reading E)*
Gunnell, John
Hall, Mike *(Weaver Vale)*
Hall, Patrick *(Bedford)*
Hancock, Mike
Hanson, David
Harvey, Nick
Heath, David *(Somerton & Frome)*
Heppell, John
Hope, Phil
Howarth, George *(Knowsley N)*
Hughes, Ms Beverley *(Stretford)*
Hughes, Simon *(Southwark N)*
Hutton, John
Iddon, Dr Brian
Ilsley, Eric
Jackson, Helen *(Hillsborough)*
Jamieson, David
Jenkins, Brian
Johnson, Alan *(Hull W & Hessle)*
Johnson, Miss Melanie *(Welwyn Hatfield)*
Jones, Ms Jenny *(Wolverh'ton SW)*
Keeble, Ms Sally
Kemp, Fraser
King, Ms Oona *(Bethnal Green)*
Ladyman, Dr Stephen
Leslie, Christopher
Levitt, Tom
Linton, Martin
Livsey, Richard
Lloyd, Tony *(Manchester C)*
Lock, David
McAvoy, Thomas
Mackinlay, Andrew
McNamara, Kevin
McNulty, Tony
Mactaggart, Fiona
McWalter, Tony
Mahon, Mrs Alice
Marsden, Paul *(Shrewsbury)*
Marshall, Jim *(Leicester S)*
Maxton, John
Merron, Gillian
Michie, Bill *(Sheff'ld Heeley)*
Moffatt, Laura
Moran, Ms Margaret
Mullin, Chris
Naysmith, Dr Doug
Oaten, Mark
Olner, Bill
Pickthall, Colin
Pike, Peter L
Pond, Chris
Pope, Greg
Prentice, Ms Bridget *(Lewisham E)*
Prescott, Rt Hon John
Purchase, Ken
Quinn, Lawrie
Rendel, David
Rowlands, Ted
Russell, Bob *(Colchester)*
Salter, Martin
Sanders, Adrian
Savidge, Malcolm
Sheerman, Barry
Simpson, Alan *(Nottingham S)*
Smith, Jacqui *(Redditch)*
Soley, Clive
Starkey, Dr Phyllis
Stoate, Dr Howard
Stuart, Ms Gisela
Stunell, Andrew
Taylor, Rt Hon Mrs Ann *(Dewsbury)*
Taylor, David *(NW Leics)*
Thomas, Gareth R *(Harrow W)*
Tipping, Paddy
Todd, Mark
Tonge, Dr Jenny
Touhig, Don
Turner, Dennis *(Wolverh'ton SE)*
Turner, Dr George *(NW Norfolk)*
Twigg, Derek *(Halton)*
Twigg, Stephen *(Enfield)*
Tyler, Paul
Walley, Ms Joan
Watts, David
Webb, Steve
Willis, Phil
Winterton, Ms Rosie *(Doncaster C)*
Wright, Dr Tony *(Cannock)*
Young, Rt Hon Sir George

Tellers for the Ayes:
Mr. Keith Hill and
Mr. Kevin Hughes.

NOES

Amess, David
Barnes, Harry
Bell, Martin *(Tatton)*
Blunt, Crispin
Brady, Graham
Colvin, Michael
Davis, Rt Hon David *(Haltemprice & Howden)*
Flight, Howard
Fox, Dr Liam
Fraser, Christopher
Gibb, Nick
Gill, Christopher
Gillan, Mrs Cheryl
Green, Damian
Hammond, Philip
Howarth, Gerald *(Aldershot)*
Leigh, Edward
Lidington, David
McIntosh, Miss Anne
Mawhinney, Rt Hon Sir Brian
Michie, Mrs Ray *(Argyll & Bute)*
Öpik, Lembit
Paskitt, James
Randall, John
Robathan, Andrew
Smith, Sir Robert *(W Ab'd'ns)*
Stanley, Rt Hon Sir John
Swayne, Desmond
Taylor, John M *(Solihull)*
Taylor, Matthew *(Truro)*
Wardle, Charles
Waterson, Nigel
Whittingdale, John
Widdecombe, Rt Hon Miss Ann
Winterton, Mrs Ann *(Congleton)*
Winterton, Nicholas *(Macclesfield)*

Tellers for the Noes:
Mr. Eric Forth and
Mr. David Maclean.

Question accordingly agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House approves the Second Report from the Select Committee on Modernisation of the House of Commons on Sittings of the House in Westminster Hall (House of Commons Paper No. 194).

Motion made, and Question put forthwith, pursuant to Order [21 May]:

That in the next Session of Parliament the Standing Orders and practice of the House shall have effect subject to the modifications set out below:

(1) On days on which the House shall sit there shall be a sitting in Westminster Hall—

(a) on Tuesdays between ten o'clock and one o'clock;

(b) on Wednesdays between half-past nine o'clock and two o'clock; and

(c) on Thursdays beginning at half-past two o'clock and continuing for up to three hours (and in calculating that period no account shall be taken of any period during which the sitting may be suspended owing to a division being called in the House or a committee of the whole House).

(2) Any Member of the House may take part in a sitting in Westminster Hall.

(3) Subject to paragraph (12) below, the business taken at any sitting in Westminster Hall shall be such as the Chairman of Ways and Means shall appoint.

(4) The Chairman of Ways and Means or a Deputy Chairman shall take the chair in Westminster Hall as Deputy Speaker; and the House may appoint not more than four other members of the Chairmen's Panel to sit in Westminster Hall as Deputy Speaker.

(5) Any order made or resolution come to at a sitting in Westminster Hall (other than a resolution to adjourn) shall be reported to the House by the Deputy Speaker and shall be deemed to be an order or resolution of the House.

(6) If a motion be made by a Minister of the Crown that an order of the day be proceeded with at a sitting in Westminster Hall, the question thereon shall be put forthwith, but such motion may be made only with the leave of the House and may not be made on a Friday.

(7) The quorum at a sitting in Westminster Hall shall be three.

(8) If at a sitting in Westminster Hall the opinion of the Deputy Speaker as to the decision of a question (other than a question for adjournment) is challenged, that question shall not be decided, and the Deputy Speaker shall report to the House accordingly; and any such question shall be put forthwith upon a motion being made in the House.

(9) If any business other than a motion for adjournment is under consideration at a sitting in Westminster Hall, and not fewer than six Members rise in their places and signify their objection to further proceeding, that business shall not be further proceeded with in Westminster Hall, and the Deputy Speaker shall report to the House accordingly, and any order under paragraph (6) above relating thereto shall be discharged.

(10) At the end of each sitting in Westminster Hall, unless a question for adjournment has previously been agreed to, the Deputy Speaker shall adjourn the sitting without putting any question; and proceedings on any business which has been entered upon but not disposed of shall lapse.

(11) The provisions of Standing Orders No. 29 (Powers of chair to propose question), No. 36 (Closure of debate), No. 37 (Majority for closure or proposal of question), No. 38 (Procedure on divisions), No. 39 (Voting), No. 40 (Division unnecessarily claimed), No. 41 (Quorum), No. 43 (Disorderly conduct), No. 44 (Order in debate), No. 45 (Members suspended, &c. to withdraw from precincts), No. 45A (Suspension of salary of Members suspended) and No. 163 (Motions to sit in private) shall not apply to sittings in Westminster Hall.

(12) The House shall meet on Wednesdays at half-past two o'clock, and paragraphs (1) and (2) of Standing Order No. 9 (Sittings of the House) shall have effect on Wednesdays; and Standing Order No. 10 (Wednesday sittings), so far as it relates to business taken before two o'clock, shall apply only to sitting in Westminster Hall, and shall have effect as if paragraph (3) were omitted.

The House divided: Ayes 132, Noes 26.

Division No. 196] **[10.39 pm**

AYES

Ainsworth, Robert *(Cov'try NE)*
Allan, Richard
Allen, Graham
Atkins, Charlotte
Baker, Norman
Ballard, Jackie
Beckett, Rt Hon Mrs Margaret
Begg, Miss Anne
Beith, Rt Hon A J
Betts, Clive
Blears, Ms Hazel
Bradley, Keith *(Withington)*
Bradshaw, Ben
Breed, Colin
Bruce, Malcolm *(Gordon)*
Burden, Richard
Burnett, John
Cabom, Rt Hon Richard
Campbell, Mrs Anne *(C'bridge)*
Campbell, Rt Hon Menzies *(NE Fife)*
Caplin, Ivor
Clark, Rt Hon Dr David *(S Shields)*
Clark, Dr Lynda *(Edinburgh Pentlands)*
Clarke, Charles *(Norwich S)*
Clarke, Eric *(Midlothian)*
Clelland, David
Coaker, Vernon
Cohen, Harry
Connarty, Michael
Cotter, Brian
Darvill, Keith
Davey, Edward *(Kingston)*
Davey, Valerie *(Bristol W)*
Dawson, Hilton
Dismore, Andrew
Donohoe, Brian H
Dowd, Jim
Drew, David
Eagle, Angela *(Wallasey)*
Eagle, Maria *(L'pool Garston)*
Efford, Clive
Emery, Rt Hon Sir Peter
Etherington, Bill
Fearn, Ronnie
Fitzpatrick, Jim
Fitzsimons, Lorna
Foster, Michael Jabez *(Hastings)*
Gapes, Mike
George, Bruce *(Walsall S)*
Gilroy, Mrs Linda
Goggins, Paul
Griffiths, Jane *(Reading E)*
Hall, Mike *(Weaver Vale)*
Hall, Patrick *(Bedford)*
Hancock, Mike
Harvey, Nick
Heath, David *(Somerton & Frome)*
Heppell, John
Howarth, George *(Knowsley N)*
Hughes, Ms Beverley *(Stretford)*
Hughes, Kevin *(Doncaster N)*
Hughes, Simon *(Southwark N)*
Hutton, John
Iddon, Dr Brian
Illsley, Eric
Jackson, Helen *(Hillsborough)*
Jamieson, David
Jenkins, Brian
Johnson, Miss Melanie *(Welwyn Hatfield)*
Jones, Ms Jenny *(Wolverh'ton SW)*
Keeble, Ms Sally
Kemp, Fraser
King, Ms Oona *(Bethnal Green)*
Ladyman, Dr Stephen
Leslie, Christopher
Levitt, Tom
Linton, Martin
Livsey, Richard
Lloyd, Tony *(Manchester C)*
McAvoy, Thomas
Mackinlay, Andrew
McNulty, Tony
Mactaggart, Fiona
McWalter, Tony
Mahon, Mrs Alice
Marsden, Paul *(Shrewsbury)*
Maxton, John
Merron, Gillian
Michie, Bill *(Sheff'd Heeley)*
Moran, Ms Margaret
Mullin, Chris
Naysmith, Dr Doug
Oaten, Mark
Olner, Bill
Pickthall, Colin
Pike, Peter L
Pond, Chris
Pope, Greg
Prentice, Ms Bridget *(Lewisham E)*
Purchase, Ken
Quinn, Lawrie
Rendel, David
Russell, Bob *(Colchester)*
Salter, Martin
Sanders, Adrian
Savidge, Malcolm
Sheerman, Barry
Simpson, Alan *(Nottingham S)*
Smith, Jacqui *(Redditch)*
Soley, Clive
Starkey, Dr Phyllis
Stoate, Dr Howard
Stringer, Graham
Stuart, Ms Gisela
Stunell, Andrew
Taylor, Rt Hon Mrs Ann *(Dewsbury)*
Taylor, David *(NW Leics)*
Thomas, Gareth R *(Harrow W)*
Tipping, Paddy
Todd, Mark
Tonge, Dr Jenny
Touhig, Don
Turner, Dennis *(Wolverh'ton SE)*
Turner, Dr George *(NW Norfolk)*
Twigg, Derek *(Halton)*
Twigg, Stephen *(Enfield)*
Tyler, Paul
Watts, David
Webb, Steve
Willis, Phil
Wright, Dr Tony *(Cannock)*
Young, Rt Hon Sir George

Tellers for the Ayes:
Mr. David Hanson and Mr. Keith Hill.

NOES

Amess, David	McIntosh, Miss Anne
Barnes, Harry	Öpik, Lembit
Bell, Martin *(Tatton)*	Randall, John
Blunt, Crispin	Stanley, Rt Hon Sir John
Brady, Graham	Swayne, Desmond
Duncan Smith, Iain	Wardle, Charles
Fox, Dr Liam	Waterson, Nigel
Fraser, Christopher	Whittingdale, John
Gibb, Nick	Widdecombe, Rt Hon Miss Ann
Gill, Christopher	Winterton, Mrs Ann *(Congleton)*
Gillan, Mrs Cheryl	Winterton, Nicholas *(Macclesfield)*
Hammond, Philip	
Howarth, Gerald *(Aldershot)*	**Tellers for the Noes:**
Leigh, Edward	**Mr. Eric Forth and**
Lidington, David	**Mr. David Maclean.**

Question accordingly agreed to.

Business of the House

Motion made, and Question put,

That, at the sitting on Wednesday 26th May—

(1) the Speaker shall put the Questions necessary to dispose of proceedings on the Motions in the names of Margaret Beckett or Mrs. Marion Roe relating to—

(a) the First Report from the Administration Committee, on the Proposal to Re-open the Line of Route during the Summer Adjournment (HC 394), not later than two hours after the Motion has been entered upon;

(b) Members' Travel to EU Institutions not later than one hour after the Motion has been entered upon; and

(c) Financial Assistance to Opposition Parties not later than one and a half hours after the Motion has been entered upon;

and the last foregoing Motion may be entered upon and proceeded with, though opposed, after Ten o'clock; and

(2) the Motion in the name of Margaret Beckett relating to Select Committees (Quorum) may be entered upon and proceeded with, though opposed, after Ten o'clock.—[*Mr. Clelland.*]

Hon. Members: Object.

Nursing Care (Eastbourne Hospital)

Motion made, and Question proposed, That this House do now adjourn.—*[Mr. Clelland.]*

10.51 pm

Mr. Nigel Waterson (Eastbourne): I am delighted to have this opportunity to highlight the concerns of many of my constituents. Let me begin by paying a warm tribute to the nurses, doctors and other staff who work at Eastbourne district general hospital. Their commitment to patient care, their expertise and their sheer hard work are commented upon by almost everyone who visits the hospital, whether as a patient or in any other capacity.

Although I am raising some genuine concerns this evening, they should in no way be allowed to overshadow the excellent work of the DGH, to undermine staff morale or to cause apprehension among those who may be undergoing or awaiting treatment there.

I want to touch on two specific cases, both tragic. Mrs. Marjorie Dyer was admitted to the DGH in October 1998 after collapsing at home. On 18 October, another patient alerted nursing staff to the fact that Mrs. Dyer was in difficulties—she was choking on a sandwich. First aid was given. A nurse obtained medical records—but, tragically, those relating to another patient. The records said that she was not for resuscitation. The cardiac arrest procedure was not implemented. Other attempts to revive her proved unsuccessful, and she sadly died.

Another incident, which occurred in March 1998, attracted even more local publicity following the recent inquest. It concerned Mrs. Pauline Freeman, who went into the DGH for a hysterectomy. This is a major, but routine, operation. In the normal way, it should certainly not be life threatening—especially for a healthy woman like Mrs. Freeman.

While she was recovering from her operation, a ligature used to tie a main artery slipped. As a result, she haemorrhaged badly, and later suffered a fatal heart attack. It emerged at the post mortem that there were 4,000 ml of blood in her peritoneal cavity. Expert evidence stated that that could have taken up to four hours to accumulate.

At the time of her death, Mrs. Freeman was in a ward of 35 patients who were being looked after by just one registered nurse, with two nursing auxiliaries and a health care assistant. Her consultant gynaecologist—acting as an expert witness at the inquest—stated that, in his opinion, the ward was understaffed, and that more frequent observations of Mrs. Freeman could have identified the problem earlier.

There seems to have been no proper care plan in place for Mrs. Freeman, post her operation. Instead of being observed every half-hour—as was thought appropriate by the expert evidence—she was observed only, at most, every two hours, and the decision was made to reduce the frequency to every four hours. An expert nursing consultant told the inquest that, in her view, staffing levels were too low. The obvious conclusion is that more nurses would have meant more frequent observations, but that is not accepted by the hospital.

Mr. Charles Wardle (Bexhill and Battle): I am grateful to my hon. Friend, and I know how hard he works in the interest of his constituents. He referred to the

[Mr. Charles Wardle]

terrible tragedy of Mrs. Pauline Freeman, a constituent of mine who died last year in the DGH after a hysterectomy. The House will appreciate how devastated her husband, Roy Freeman, and her family have been by the suddenness and the appalling circumstances of her death.

After meeting Mr. Freeman and listening to his account of his painful experience and of his family's sense of total shock and loss, I was able to speak to the chairman of the NHS executive south-east and to the Secretary of State for Health and to communicate with the chairman of the local health authority, all of whom, I am sure, appreciate Mr. Freeman's feelings. I believe that they are trying to help.

I know that my hon. Friend is working closely with the hospital trust. It may be helpful if I tell the House briefly what Mr. Freeman wants as an enduring tribute to his wife. He—

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Mr. Michael J. Martin): Order. I feel for the hon. Gentleman—it is a very tragic situation—but the rules of the House do not allow an intervention to go on for so long, and I will have to stop him.

Mr. Waterson: I know that my hon. Friend has been in contact with Mr. Freeman and has passed on his views to the authorities, and in particular to the Secretary of State for Health, and I am sure that he will continue to do what he can to look after his constituent in this time of great need.

The trust has maintained that the decision to reduce the frequency of observation was a proper one in the circumstances. It also contends that, had there been more staff on duty at the time, it would have made no difference to the management of Mrs. Freeman's care.

In a letter to me, the health authority's chief executive said:

"It is the Trust's view that the staffing level on the night of Mrs. Freeman's death was deemed to be acceptable by the sister in charge of the evening shift, and the trained nurse in charge of the night shift considered the staffing levels adequate for the patients under her care at the time. That view is shared by the Trust's Chief Nurse."

He also said:

"at no time has the Trust advised the Health Authority of an inability to provide a safe service, although it would be fair to say that the Trust had requested funding to improve the quality of nursing cover above the current level."

I view those claims with considerable scepticism. Can it really be the case that extra staff would have made no difference at all? Why was the decision taken to reduce observations of Mrs. Freeman to only once every four hours? If the trust is confident that it is providing a safe service, why is it requesting funding to improve the quality of nursing cover?

I do not want to dwell too much on individual cases, but the cases have revived concerns that have been around for some time, about the total number of nursing staff on duty at any one time and the heavy use of agency and bank staff. The local community health council, to which I pay tribute for its concerned but balanced role, has raised concerns over a two-year period; I have expressed concern about the level of nursing staff in the past; and many local people have spoken out, often through the columns of my local newspapers, the *Herald* and the *Argus*.

Perhaps most worrying was the district audit report produced by the Audit Commission last September. I have retained a copy. The main conclusions are summarised as follows:

"the Trust has on average significantly fewer nurses than other Trusts calculated on a like-for-like ward basis. While quality is being given an increasing emphasis, the lean staffing levels doubtless limit the quality of care that can be delivered to patients."

The report goes on to talk of

"staffing more than 10 per cent. lower than is the norm elsewhere . . . Eastbourne has 65 fewer nurses in post on these wards than the average elsewhere."

In fairness, I should say that, at each of the inquests, the coroner recorded a verdict of accidental death, but we know that there are limits on the extent to which a coroner can apportion blame or indeed engage in detailed investigations. It may be that those were in truth tragic accidents that would have occurred in any case, whatever amount of nursing care was available, but I continue to be troubled by the expert evidence that has been adduced as well as by the fact that the concerns are not new.

What action is being taken in the light of those findings and events? The trust and the health authority have challenged the findings of the audit report. Investigations were carried out after the two fatalities. The hospital's patient services director is reviewing her original investigation into the death of Mrs. Freeman in the light of the independent expert evidence at the inquest. The health authority has engaged the services of a former regional director of nursing to advise it.

I welcome the fact that the south-east region of the NHS executive is carrying out an investigation. There is to be a report to the primary care group meeting on 21 June and to the health authority on 24 June.

Mr. Norman Baker (Lewes): My constituents, half of whom are also served by the DGH, view the situation seriously. While they endorse the good work done by the nurses, they are very concerned by the incidents that the hon. Gentleman has mentioned. They are concerned about why those incidents happened and why they were not picked up earlier. Does he agree that serious questions need to be asked about the shortage of nurses at Eastbourne DGH and about the competence of the management? I assure the hon. Gentleman that, although we belong to different parties, I am willing to stand shoulder to shoulder with him on this issue of great importance to my constituents.

Mr. Waterson: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for that and I agree that there are serious questions to be asked. I intend to ask some of them shortly. I have received an update on nurse recruiting from Mr. Clive Uren, chief executive of the trust. He tells me that, of the 47 vacancies that exist, 18 have been offered to newly qualified students and a further 17 have been offered to, and accepted by, external candidates. They have offered 22 posts to overseas nurses and, in addition, a group of 19 Eastbourne student nurses will qualify in September. That is fine as far as it goes, and those figures relate to the current establishment for nursing staff.

We all know that there is a national shortage of nurses, and that problem is not limited to Eastbourne. I received a briefing for this debate from the Royal College of Nursing that states:

"The RCN believes that this tragic case illustrates the potential dangers of inadequate staffing levels in hospitals, and thinks that there are some important lessons to be learnt."

It also refers to its snapshot survey of 55 medical wards in September 1998.

I hope that we shall hear from the Minister what the Government are doing about the general problem. Is enough being done about nurses' pay? Why is only one nurse in 15 receiving the higher level of pay settlement? Why have some still not received it? Why will most nurses still be £53 worse off under this Government than at the time of the last election?

In a parliamentary answer in April, the Minister of State, Department of Health mentioned a figure of £16.5 million that would be made available for the Sussex education consortium, but how many new nurses will that mean? It seems curious that Eastbourne DGH is going as far afield as Canada to recruit nurses, but only recently I had in my advice surgery two local young ladies who are unable to obtain the funding to qualify as nurses.

In their attempts to return waiting lists to where they were when they took office, the Government have put enormous pressure on dedicated NHS staff and risk skewing clinical priorities. Such measures must be matched by appropriate resources, and that is the key issue. I ask the Minister for that commitment tonight.

We are faced with two particular tragedies, and I make no apology for dealing with them in detail. There is a concern in my constituency and those of my neighbouring colleagues about what is happening at the DGH. The plain fact is that the staff who work there are committed to providing a caring, effective service to their local communities, and they should be praised and respected for that. However, as I have said, they are under intense pressure and there is a danger, given that pressure and the level of staffing—especially at night—that mistakes will happen and things will be overlooked.

I ask the Minister to address the question of nurse recruitment and to say how he views the future of the DGH. How will he address and solve the obvious problems? I also extend to him a personal invitation to come and visit my local hospital to see for himself the pressures on the staff and the excellent care that they deliver under difficult circumstances.

11.4 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health (Mr. John Hutton): First, I congratulate the hon. Member for Eastbourne (Mr. Waterson) on raising this subject tonight and on the constructive tone of his remarks. I am especially grateful for the praise that he extended to the staff at Eastbourne district general hospital, to which the hon. Member for Lewes (Mr. Baker) also referred. There is no doubt of the staff's commitment to the well-being of the patients in their care.

In addition, I should also like to offer my sincere condolences to the families of Mrs. Freeman and Mrs. Dyer on their sad and tragic loss.

Mr. Wardle: Does the Minister appreciate that what Mr. Freeman wants as an enduring tribute to his wife is to ensure that the lessons to be learned from her tragic death will be used to make a real difference for other women who go into hospital for the same operation? As Mr. Freeman said:

"If you can't provide the package, you shouldn't start the project."

He asks that much more be done to guarantee, as far as possible, that the mistakes that took away his wife's life are not repeated.

Mr. Hutton: I certainly endorse those comments, and I shall say more about both cases in a moment. The hon. Members for Eastbourne and for Bexhill and Battle (Mr. Wardle) spoke movingly about the grief experienced by both families, and I want to associate myself with those remarks.

I am sure that the hon. Member for Eastbourne will agree that, overwhelmingly, most patients who use the NHS receive safe and effective treatment and care. However, I accept that we need a culture of openness in the national health service that acknowledges, highlights and responds to problems effectively and quickly.

That is why quality is at the heart of the Government's strategy for modernising the national health service. In July last year, our consultation document entitled "A First Class Service: Quality in the New NHS" was published, and we were very encouraged by the response that it received. Good progress is being made in putting the proposals into practice and we are already seeing attitudes and priorities begin to shift.

For example, guidance was published in March on the new framework for clinical governance, and arrangements are being put in place across the NHS. That will bring a fundamental shift in the culture of the NHS to one that has quality of care at its heart. For the first time, quality will be enshrined in statute and the responsibility of NHS trusts and primary care groups will be reinforced with a new statutory duty of quality, framed in such a way to provide meaningful support to the continuing improvement of quality. A senior clinician will be responsible for quality for each health authority, trust and primary care group. Those clinicians will produce reports on quality in their respective organisations, and the first clinical governance reports will be published in April next year.

In addition, the Health Bill currently being scrutinised in Standing Committee contains provisions to establish the Commission for Health Improvement. The commission's job will be to monitor quality standards and to intervene promptly, if necessary, when things are going wrong. The commission will be established later this year, and begin its first full-year work programme in April next year.

An NHS performance assessment framework has been published for use by the NHS over the coming year, and will be followed soon by the first set of high-level performance indicators. The National Institute for Clinical Excellence came into being on 1 April, and the first two national service frameworks will be published later this year.

Those points summarise the action that the Government are taking. Once the Health Bill becomes law, NHS trusts will be obliged to have in place systems to monitor and improve both the quality of treatment that patients receive and the outcome of that treatment. The measures should go a long way to ensuring that the constituents of the

[Mr. Hutton]

hon. Member for Eastbourne can continue to have confidence that the services provided in Eastbourne are safe and of high quality.

The hon. Member for Eastbourne raised the subject of the recruitment and retention campaign for nurses, and I shall address my remarks to his concerns. The Government's target is to have enough nurses to provide the treatment that patients need. Our campaign to recruit up to 15,000 more nurses over the next three years has got off to a very good start. Since we set up our telephone hotline on 1 February, we have had over 53,000 calls from people interested in a career in nursing, and about 5,000 have been from qualified nurses who are showing an interest about returning to nursing. By the end of April, 650 had actually done so.

On 5 March, my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State announced additional funding of £5 million specifically to support return to practice initiatives in 1999/2000, focusing on getting former nurses back to the NHS. This builds on the similar initiatives already in place following funding of £4 million last year. In Eastbourne, 125 inquiries have been received as part of the return to practice initiatives since May 1998. That has resulted in 35 applications, of which to date 20 have been appointed to posts within the trust.

We have taken the first steps to persuade former staff to return to the NHS, and we must keep staff. We will do that by valuing their contribution and recognising that quality of care for patients goes hand in hand with quality of care for staff. On 1 April 1997, the total nursing establishment for Eastbourne Hospitals NHS trust stood at 790. Through additional funding provided under the winter pressure initiatives, the number increased to 811 on 1 April 1998 and to 833 on 1 April 1999, an additional 43 nurses in total.

On top of that, other initiatives are being taken by the trust. Eastbourne district hospital has made significant progress in increasing the number of full-time nursing staff. At the end of March 1999, the trust reported 47 whole-time equivalent vacancies, as the hon. Member for Eastbourne said. Since then, a number of appointments have been made. Eighteen have been offered to newly qualified students and another 10 to overseas staff nurses. With other external appointments, the trust predicts that vacancies will be reduced to approximately 12 whole-time equivalent vacancies at the end of June.

Further efforts are being made by the trust to fill vacancies with a major recruitment initiative abroad, and a further group of student nurses is due to qualify in September. The trust is making significant progress to ensure that use of bank and agency nurses is kept to the minimum. However, as the hon. Gentleman will be aware, that does not address the findings of the district auditors, that Eastbourne was below the average on its complement of nursing staff.

Following receipt of the report, a detailed action plan was agreed between the trust and the auditors to address the issues raised in the report. East Sussex, Brighton and Hove health authority, as purchaser of the services provided in Eastbourne, conducted its own review of the report, and the trust and the health authority agreed to conduct a joint analysis of current nurse staffing levels. The discussions continue, and any recommendations will be considered by Eastbourne Downs primary care group, which is responsible for advising the health authority on the commissioning of hospital services for its patients, at its public meeting on 21 June. The health authority will consider the matter on 24 June. In the mean time, it is the responsibility of the local trust management and doctors to ensure that services are provided in a safe environment.

Over the past 18 months, we have provided Eastbourne Hospitals NHS trust with an extra £5 million of additional resources over inflation. The additional money includes £1.7 million on the waiting list initiative, £1 million for emergency activity and more than £500,000 for winter pressures. The money has enabled the trust to open more than 20 additional surgical beds and has enabled two five-day wards to be extended to seven-day wards. The money has also allowed the trust to recruit additional nurses to manage these wards together with the full range of supporting staff.

I would like to turn to the tragic incidents raised by the hon. Members for Eastbourne and for Bexhill and Battle that occurred over the past year at Eastbourne district general hospital, and I should briefly explain the action taken by the trust.

Mrs. Freeman died in early 1998 following complications resulting from a hysterectomy operation. Following this tragic incident, the trust investigated the circumstances leading up to Mrs. Freeman's death. Following publication of the coroner's report, in which the verdict of accidental death was recorded, the trust agreed to reinvestigate the matter in the light of the comments made at the inquest and in the professional reports of independent witnesses. The review is in progress and the results are expected to be presented at the public part of the trust's board meeting on 18 June.

In the case of Mrs. Dyer, who sadly died earlier this year, the trust again conducted an internal inquiry into the death and is currently reviewing its resuscitation policy to ensure that the tragedy should never be repeated.

However, even with the work that the trust has done to ensure that these events are never repeated, and despite the reported views held by the Eastbourne, Seaford and Wealdon community health council

"that the very great majority of people treated at Eastbourne achieve a perfectly acceptable clinical outcome and have a satisfactory hospital experience"

there is obviously continued local concern about service provision.

With that in mind, senior officials from the south-east regional office of the NHS Executive visited the trust last Thursday to discuss these events. Following the meeting, and after careful consideration, the regional director has asked the regional nursing director to carry out a review of nursing care at the trust.

The review will provide the regional director with an objective assessment of the current position and provide recommendations that will form the basis of an agreed action plan for the trust. It will also take account of current work being undertaken by the trust and the health authority. However, I can assure the hon. Gentleman that its members will be completely independent from both the trust and the health authority.

The purpose of the review will be to assess whether the trust has in place appropriate policies and procedures to enable effective nursing care to be delivered. The review will also determine what quality standards are in place, including robust nursing policies and procedures supported by staff training, and assess whether these are monitored effectively. It will also assess the adequacy of investigation, documentation, reporting and follow-up of untoward incidents and it will consider, in the light of all of the above, the trust's progress in implementing the clinical governance agenda.

Further details, announcing the terms of reference and membership of the review team, will be issued by the south-east regional office in the near future. I can assure the hon. Gentleman, his hon. Friend the Member for Bexhill and Battle and the hon. Member for Lewes that the review will be open and fully accessible. Its full report will be published by the end of September.

I hope that what I have said in the House today shows that we take quality issues seriously and that that is at the heart of the Government's strategy for modernising the NHS. Let me reassure the hon. Gentleman and his constituents that the Government are taking, and will continue to take, action to ensure that the highest standard of care is delivered throughout the national health service. Nurses have a crucial role to play in that. For that reason, more nurses are being recruited, both in Eastbourne and in other hospitals throughout the country.

We want the public to have full confidence in the local NHS. By taking action to raise the quality of care and by responding to local concerns in the way that we have, I hope that the hon. Gentleman can be confident about our commitment to the NHS in his constituency.

Question put and agreed to.

Adjourned accordingly at seventeen minutes past Eleven o'clock.

House of Commons

Tuesday 25 May 1999

The House met at half-past Two o'clock

PRAYERS

[MADAM SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

Oral Answers to Questions

SCOTLAND

The Secretary of State was asked—

Tuition Fees

1. **Mr. Michael Fabricant** (Lichfield): If he will make a statement on tuition fees for tertiary education in Scotland. [84126]

The Secretary of State for Scotland (Dr. John Reid): The policy on tuition fees, announced in July 1997 by my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Education and Employment, remains throughout the United Kingdom. From 1 July, education—and so the conduct and outcome of the review being conducted at the Scottish parliamentary level—will be a matter for the Scottish Parliament.

Mr. Fabricant: First, I congratulate the right hon. Gentleman on his promotion to the Scottish Office. I hope that it will not be too long before he is promoted to the position of Secretary of State for Defence—which is where, I suspect, his true interests lie. However, before he gloats too much at the victory of his right hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow, Anniesland (Mr. Dewar) over the fawning Liberal Democrats in Scotland, does he think that, while the United Kingdom is still the United Kingdom, it is fair that some students studying at United Kingdom universities should be disadvantaged in comparison with other students studying at United Kingdom universities?

Dr. Reid: I think that we strengthen the unity of the United Kingdom by recognising our diversity, which is precisely one of the reasons why we have devolved decision making to Scotland and to Wales, and why we are on the verge of doing so to Northern Ireland and to London. Perhaps, in future, we shall do so also to other areas. I think that the vast majority of people across the United Kingdom will be gratified that the Government are ensuring that local decisions affecting local people are being taken at a more local level.

Ms Sandra Osborne (Ayr): I join in welcoming my right hon. Friend to his first Question Time in his new role as Secretary of State. Will he confirm that it is estimated that as many as 40 per cent. of students will pay no tuition fees at all?

Dr. Reid: I thank my hon. Friend for her congratulations. I can also tell her that although it was estimated that about 40 per cent. of those entering Scottish higher education would not pay any tuition fees at all, according to the latest figures that we have, more than 50 per cent. will pay no tuition fees at all. She will know that the entire purpose of our policy is to extend higher education in Scotland to a far greater number of people than has hitherto been the case. Moreover, the fact that more than 50 per cent. will pay no tuition fees demonstrates that a greater number of people from low-income groups will now have access to education, which surely must be one of the priorities of any decent, civilised Government.

Mr. John Swinney (North Tayside): On behalf of the Scottish National party, I congratulate the right hon. Gentleman on his appointment to Secretary of State. He will be aware that there is a partnership document involving the Labour party and the Liberal Democrats in the Scottish Parliament. Is it his understanding that, when the inquiry on tuition fees reaches its conclusions, the Liberal Democrats will have a free vote on the matter—or will they just take the Labour Whip?

Dr. Reid: You will know, Madam Speaker, and the hon. Gentleman will know that matters of procedure within the Scottish Parliament, and within the parties in the Scottish Parliament, are entirely for that Parliament and those parties. However, I thank the hon. Gentleman for his congratulations. I also urge him to consider whether the main aim of any civilised party in modern Scotland should not be to ensure that educational opportunities are extended to the maximum number of people so that young people are able to liberate their talents and achieve their full capabilities—especially those on lower incomes, who will benefit from the arrangements introduced by the Government.

Mr. Jim Murphy (Eastwood): I welcome my right hon. Friend to the Dispatch Box as Secretary of State for Scotland. Traditionally, the debate has focused on the ancient universities in Scotland and on those attending them. Is my right hon. Friend today able to provide specific figures on the participation in higher education of those who are from low-income backgrounds, and on the participation of those attending further education colleges in Scotland, where the majority of Scotland's students study? Our policy will succeed or fail on that type of measurement.

Dr. Reid: My hon. Friend is quite right. I have already mentioned that, this year, more than 50 per cent. of entrants to Scottish higher education will pay no tuition fees. As he will know, because of the arrangements that we have made, anyone whose parental income is less than the average will pay nothing at all in tuition fees. The figure of more than 50 per cent. is not only much higher than estimated, but indicates that, for the first time, we are increasingly providing people from low-income backgrounds with the opportunity of higher education. Moreover, the figure in Scottish further education colleges will be 70 per cent.

We should be proud of those figures, and of the fact that more than 47 per cent. of young people in Scotland now go into higher education. I am not as old as some people may think I am, but 20 or 30 years ago—30, actually—when I went to university, the proportion of

people in Scotland attending higher education was only one in 20; now, we are achieving a proportion of one in two. That is to the credit of this Government.

Dr. Liam Fox (Woodspring): The Secretary of State is in fact older than I thought he was before he gave that reply.

I welcome the Secretary of State to his new post. He arrives there with an advantage over most Secretaries of State, in that he has the genuine affection and good will of many hon. Members, which many Secretaries of State do not begin with. However, does he believe that, leaving aside the legality, it is fair or desirable for Members of this place who are also Members of the Scottish Parliament to come here to vote to apply tuition fees to English and Welsh students, but then to go to the Scottish Parliament to exempt Scottish students from those fees?

Dr. Reid: I think that people who vote in different ways in two different areas will have to resolve that problem themselves, irrespective of their parties. The purpose of devolution is to give the power of decision making to another tier of government within the sovereignty of this Parliament and the unity of the United Kingdom. Therefore, we have to countenance the possibility that, on occasions, the Scottish Parliament will give certain issues different priorities. There are two ground rules to enabling that partnership to develop.

First, when we or the Scottish Parliament take decisions, we must have regard not only to the direct interests of our constituents, but to the wider implications. Secondly, when either Parliament allocates resources to one area, it has honestly to tell people from which area it plans to take those resources and to answer for that to its electorate.

Dr. Fox: I am extremely grateful to the Secretary of State for the first reasonably thought-out response to the implications of devolution that we have heard in the House for some time. Does he agree that the fiasco over the Liberal Democrats' position on tuition fees in Scotland exposes what an absolute sham the whole concept of proportional representation is? Is there not a lesson in that for the House to bear in mind when we are engaged in discussing issues with those who are in the bargain basement of principles and who will give up any promise whatsoever for the mere sniff of the inside of a ministerial Mondeo? Does he further agree that when politicians decide policies after an election, rather than people being able to vote on them, it is unhealthy for a democratic system? Perhaps the Secretary of State will take this opportunity to tell his colleagues on the Back Benches what effect what happens in Scotland will have on policies here at Westminster.

Dr. Reid: Proportional representation was deemed to be suitable in Scotland because it was the form of electoral system that was judged best to meet the consensual discussions that were taking place in Scotland. It is no more complicated than that. The hon. Gentleman is a bit churlish about the constructive way in which the parties in the Scottish Parliament have dealt with issues, given the arithmetic that was thrown up by proportional representation. When the arithmetic suggested an overall majority, two parties—the Labour party and the Liberal Democrat party—faced up to that problem, discussed it, engaged in dialogue, reached a compromise and came up with a solution. When the problem of tuition fees came up, they discussed it, engaged in dialogue, reached a compromise and came up with a solution.

The hon. Gentleman misunderstands the feeling of the Scottish people, who often ask why politicians cannot work together. Surprisingly, he and the Leader of the Scottish National party, with their cries of no compromise, betrayal, no surrender and no discussions, display an attitude that is nearer old Westminster and old, ultra-left Labour than the new politics of Scotland.

Scientific Research

2. **Dr. Ian Gibson** (Norwich, North): What plans he has to distribute and control funds for scientific research within Scotland. [84127]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Scotland (Mr. Calum Macdonald): The Scottish Office controls a block of research-related spending of around £250 million in total. This underpins the science base in Scotland and covers the full range of the responsibilities of the Scottish Office. The Scottish Parliament will assume devolved responsibility for all these matters on 1 July.

At the same time, the UK research councils also fund research projects in Scotland. Research council funding is a reserved matter.

Dr. Gibson: Will my hon. Friend join me in congratulating medical scientists at the university of Dundee, who are developing radical cancer therapies and have launched a £4 million appeal? Does he agree that with talent like that, they can well compete for research grants on the international scene as well as for those from UK research councils and their charities? There is no need for breakaway funding councils; they can compete across the world.

Mr. Macdonald: I agree completely with my hon. Friend. Some Scottish Office research funding for the health service in Scotland, for example, goes to successful bidders throughout the United Kingdom. It is important to maintain those connections.

Miss Anne McIntosh (Vale of York): Will the Minister assure us that funding will continue for the research centre in Edinburgh that was responsible for much of the research that linked bovine spongiform encephalopathy to Creutzfeldt-Jakob disease? Who will be responsible for funding that centre? Will it be funded nationally or from Scotland?

Mr. Macdonald: I am not sure whether that research institute is funded through the Scottish Office or through UK funding. If the funding comes from the Scottish Office, it will be a matter for the Scottish Parliament. If it is UK research council funding, it will continue as at present.

Mr. Jimmy Hood (Clydesdale): Will my hon. Friend outline the steps that the Government are taking to allay public concerns about genetically modified crops?

Mr. Macdonald: Some £2 million of Scottish Office research funding goes into GM-related research. That research is important to gain the necessary knowledge to assess the future of GM crops and foods.

Mr. Malcolm Bruce (Gordon): On behalf of the Liberal Democrats, I welcome the whole of the renewed

Scottish Office team to the Front Bench. I appreciate the constructive way in which they seem to be engaging in the new politics. *[Interruption.]* That constructive spirit is being well supported on the ground by people who understand the need for stability and continuity.

Will the Minister ensure, in his role as a UK Minister, that the excellent research facilities in Scotland—particularly in the north-east of Scotland, at organisations such as the Rowett institute, the Macaulay institute and universities—secure continued funding through the Scottish Parliament? Will he also support our excellent universities as they seek the UK and international funding for which they have earned a reputation throughout the world?

Mr. Macdonald: First, I have always been a UK Minister, because the Scottish Office has always been part of the UK Government. The hon. Gentleman makes an important point. Scottish research institutes should be able to continue to bid for funding from around the United Kingdom.

Closed Circuit Television

3. **Mr. Brian H. Donohoe** (Cunninghame, South): If he will make a statement on the Government's policy on CCTV as a method of crime prevention. [84128]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Scotland (Mr. Calum Macdonald): The Government are firmly committed to strong policies on law and order. That is why we support CCTV as a method of crime prevention, as is demonstrated by our commitment to the Scottish Office CCTV challenge competition, which has awarded £6.8 million to more than 100 projects in Scotland since 1996. From 1 July, that will be a matter for the Scottish Parliament.

Mr. Donohoe: I thank my hon. Friend for that answer. He will know of my interest in the subject, because Irvine and Kilwinning in my constituency are without CCTV. I wrote to my hon. Friend the Member for Central Fife (Mr. McLeish), who was then the relevant Minister, and received a reply at the end of last month suggesting that there would be a new competition for an additional £13 million. When will that begin?

Mr. Macdonald: I know that my hon. Friend has been lobbying on the issue for some time. He lobbied successfully for funding for Ardrossan, Saltcoats and Stevenson. The next round of funding will be in July or August, and will be a matter for the Scottish Parliament.

Mr. Peter Viggers (Gosport): Do the Government think that there is a connection between the reduction in the number of police officers in Scotland in the past year and the 13 per cent. growth in crime?

Mr. Macdonald: I know that CCTV has resulted in a 20 per cent. reduction in crime figures in some areas. It is not a substitute for good, modern policing, but the two must go hand in hand.

Ministerial Responsibilities

4. **Sir Teddy Taylor** (Rochford and Southend, East): If he will publish a document listing his responsibilities following the establishment of the Scottish Executive. [84129]

12. **Miss Julie Kirkbride** (Bromsgrove): If he will make a statement on the future role of the Secretary of State for Scotland. [84138]

The Secretary of State for Scotland (Dr. John Reid): As Secretary of State, I will continue to have the role of representing Scottish interests across the range of matters that are reserved to the United Kingdom Parliament, as well as easing and assisting in relationships between the British Government and the Scottish Executive and between the two Parliaments.

Sir Teddy Taylor: While I wish the Secretary of State well, are we not in danger of creating a costly constitutional nonsense by retaining a group of Scottish Ministers who will be little more than Muppets sitting on the Front Bench, with no power to influence decision making in Scotland? If he doubts that, as he will no doubt tell me he does, would he care to consider Question Time today—before 1 July—when he will be asked what visits he plans and what his opinions are on social inclusion and biotechnology? Will the change not make a nonsense of the House of Commons? Why should we spend all the money on keeping a Scottish Office when its powers have gone?

Dr. Reid: I do not whom the hon. Gentleman meant by his reference to Muppets—we are not a bad team, with three PhDs and a millionaire. People in Scotland are capable of deciding who is and is not a Muppet, as they did in Cathcart in 1979. I assure the hon. Gentleman that the people of Scotland wish to be Scottish and British, they wish to take more of their own decisions in the Scottish Parliament, and they wish to play a full part in a partnership with English, Welsh and Northern Ireland representatives in the United Kingdom. In so doing, they send Members of Parliament here who have been and will be active in defending and representing the interests of the people of Scotland at every level and across the range of important issues—which he deems unimportant to them—such as pensions, benefits and welfare, economic and industrial policy, and foreign affairs and defence. I should have thought that that was a full-time job.

Miss Kirkbride: Now that we have devolution, will the Secretary of State give a proper answer to the so-called West Lothian question which is greatly exercising my constituents in Bromsgrove and those in many other English seats? In particular, will he explain why it is right or fair that the right hon. Member for Airdrie and Shotts (Mrs. Liddell) should be the Minister for Transport, with responsibility for roads in my constituency, but this House has no responsibility for roads in Scotland? Why is it right or fair that his hon. Friends who sit for Scottish seats can vote on health and education issues that affect my constituency, while English Members cannot vote on those issues in Scotland?

Dr. Reid: I am sure that they speak of little else but the West Lothian question in the pubs of Bromsgrove. I must remember not to go for a good night out in a Bromsgrove pub.

The hon. Lady seems to assume that the process of devolution stopped at the Scottish border. It did not. The process of devolution and decentralisation is of benefit and applicable to the whole of the United Kingdom. It is already taking place in Wales; we are discussing it in Northern Ireland; and we are devolving power to London. As that process unfolds, and we decentralise the basis of decision making, we will of course consider the structures at the top that were built on the old system. We are committed to bringing decision making closer to people in the United Kingdom, be they in Scotland, Wales or Northern Ireland, or, indeed, in England.

Dr. Norman A. Godman (Greenock and Inverclyde): I offer my sincere compliments to my right hon. Friend. What authority has he over matters relating to the management of traditional Scottish inshore fishing grounds? The recent transfer of jurisdictional control over several thousand square miles of traditional Scottish fishing grounds to English courts has caused deep concern among fishermen. Should not the Scottish Fishermen's Federation have been consulted on that matter?

Dr. Reid: I thank my hon. Friend for his compliments. First, as he will understand, there was previously no legal boundary line but an administrative one. Secondly, the line that has been set allows something like—I speak from memory—140,000 square miles of sea for Scottish fishing. That line has been set according to the internationally agreed legal standards and determined by the two adjacent land points. Fishermen on the western side of Scotland seem prepared to accept that international standard, although those on the eastern side do not.

I am aware of the concerns, which have been communicated by letter to my Ministers. I shall listen carefully to what fishermen have to say.

Mr. Tam Dalyell (Linlithgow): It will be within your recollection, Madam Speaker, that you had some strong words to say on the matter of the sub judice rules in connection with Lockerbie. Will my right hon. Friend say whether the person with the relevant responsibility—either the Advocate-General or the Lord Advocate—is addressing the question of how *The Sunday Times* came to run a coach and horses through the sub judice rules on its front page last Sunday? Is any action being taken?

Dr. Reid: I thank my hon. Friend for the notice that he gave me about that question, which he did as I walked through the door into the Chamber this afternoon. I can tell him that my understanding of the matter, which is much fuller than it was before I entered the Chamber, is that it has been the subject of discussions between the Attorney-General and other parties, but that so far it has not involved Scottish Law Officers. However, in the near future I shall discuss the matter with my hon. and learned Friend the Member for Edinburgh, Pentlands (Dr. Clark), who is Advocate-General for Scotland and on the Bench beside me today. I shall then write to my hon. Friend with further details.

Dr. Liam Fox (Woodspring): The Secretary of State should be aware that his response to my hon. Friend the Member for Bromsgrove (Miss Kirkbride) about the breaking-up of England and the imposition of its balkanisation on an unwelcoming English public is likely only to make the West Lothian question talked about in Bromsgrove. However, will the Secretary of State say whether there are any reserved powers affecting Scotland that are not covered by the responsibilities of another Secretary of State in the Cabinet? The right hon. Gentleman gave a description of his role earlier, but is his primary role to be the Scottish representative in the Cabinet, or is it to be the Cabinet's representative in Scotland? In other words, will he be the messenger boy taking messages from the Prime Minister to the First Minister, or vice versa?

Dr. Reid: On the first question, there are a number of residual powers that are not under the control of other Departments. I shall write to the hon. Gentleman with a list, which he can read in due course. On the second question, I know that the hon. Gentleman has difficulty holding two ideas in his head at the same time, but it is possible to be both Scottish and British. Indeed, the Scottish people have lived with those two ideas for some 300 years, as even a cursory glance at Scottish history would reveal.

I am therefore both a representative of the Scottish people in the British Cabinet, and a representative of the British Cabinet in Scotland and throughout the United Kingdom. I have no difficulty at all in reconciling both roles, and I do not think that the hon. Gentleman should worry about my capacity to do both jobs at the same time.

European Legislation

5. **Ms Rachel Squire** (Dunfermline, West): If he will make a statement on the arrangements for joint scrutiny with the Scottish Executive of European legislation. [84130]

The Secretary of State for Scotland (Dr. John Reid): On this occasion I shall refer to my book. Detailed arrangements for the scrutiny of European legislation in the Scottish Parliament will be a matter for members of its European Committee. Liaison between that Committee and the European scrutiny Committees will be a matter for members of those Committees. Scottish Ministers will play their part in fully developing the agreed UK line.

Ms Squire: I, too, begin by congratulating my right hon. Friend on becoming Secretary of State for Scotland. Does he agree that, although the European Union has brought considerable financial and other benefits to Scotland, both to remote rural areas and to areas that have experienced heavy job losses in traditional manufacturing and other industries, it is still seen as unaccountable and distant from people's everyday lives? Does he therefore agree that the Scottish Parliament and the UK Parliament can take the lead in bringing Europe closer to the people by working together, developing effective joint scrutiny of European legislation and, through such a partnership, delivering the best possible deal for the people whom we jointly represent?

Dr. Reid: I agree with my hon. Friend on both points. We need a strong voice in Europe, and that is provided by the Labour Government. We aim to see Scotland leading in Britain and Europe, not leaving Britain or Europe. Our voice should certainly be directed partly towards making the EU, its instruments and the vehicles

of its policy more directly relevant to ordinary families in rural and other areas throughout Scotland. The achievement of a strong voice in Europe, to make the EU more relevant, to reform it and to bring it more directly to people's interests, is the reason that every vote in the European election should be cast for the Scottish Labour party.

Sir Robert Smith (West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine): When considering implementation of European legislation, will the Secretary of State consider the concerns of the hon. Member for Greenock and Inverclyde (Dr. Godman) and meet the Scottish Fishermen's Federation to discuss its concerns that past implementation has set precedents of which the Committees that agreed the orders were not aware and which could influence decisions on future implementation?

Dr. Reid: As I said to my hon. Friend the Member for Greenock and Inverclyde (Dr. Godman), I shall carefully consider any representation that I receive from Mr. Morrison and the Scottish Fishermen's Federation. I have explained the basis on which the decision was taken, but, if any representation is made, I shall consider it.

Mrs. Rosemary McKenna (Cumbernauld and Kilsyth): I welcome all the new members of the Front-Bench team to their posts. On a European note, may I suggest that Scots are good Scots, good Britons and good Europeans? Will my right hon. Friend join me in sending our best wishes to our fellow Scot Alex Ferguson and his Manchester United squad who will attempt to bring the European champions cup to Britain tomorrow?

Dr. Reid: I have no hesitation in agreeing with every word that my hon. Friend said. Alex Ferguson is an example to us all of how to lead in Britain and in Europe. That is precisely what the Labour Government aim to do, and that is another reason for voting Labour in the European elections. We send heartfelt support to Manchester United, and I hope to see the European cup come back to Britain.

Mr. Oliver Letwin (West Dorset): May I add to the congratulations that many hon. Members have offered to the Secretary of State, not least because of the quite admirable way in which he has dealt with his first, positively surreal Scottish Question Time? In the light of his remarkable and self-proclaimed ability to do two things at once, whose part would the Secretary of State take if a piece of European legislation meant that the interests of Scotland conflicted with those of the whole United Kingdom?

Dr. Reid: It is clear that United Kingdom Ministers will lead on issues in Europe. It is equally clear, however, that the Scottish Parliament and its representatives will be fully involved in formulating the UK policy on any representation to Europe. It may be some time since the hon. Gentleman was in Government; I cannot recall whether he ever was.

Mr. Letwin *indicated dissent.*

Dr. Reid: He modestly indicates that he was not. When, at some distant stage in the future, the hon. Gentleman does enter Government, he will find that the reconciliation of differences such as the one that he has raised are an everyday occurrence.

Modern Apprenticeships

6. **Mr. Michael Connarty** (Falkirk, East): How many modern apprenticeships places will be made available in Scotland; and if he will make a statement on the timetable and cost of the initiative. [84132]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Scotland (Mr. Calum Macdonald): A well-trained work force are the foundation of a modern economy and that is why the Government set a target of 15,000 modern apprenticeships by 2002. From 1 July 1999, this will be a matter for the Scottish Parliament. The Labour party campaigned in the recent Scottish election on a commitment to increase that figure to 20,000—a doubling of the present figure. The budget for this financial year is £17 million.

Mr. Connarty: I thank my hon. Friend for that reply. As I represent an area with a heavy petrochemical industry, I have already come across young people in Grangemouth and the surrounding towns who have taken up modern apprenticeships in the chemical industry. May I reassure my hon. Friend that they are pleased that they have a Government team at Scottish and at United Kingdom level who are willing to invest in their future? Will he reassure those young people that this Government, and Scottish Ministers working in co-operation with UK Ministers, will maintain a steady course and a stable and strong economy so that they can be sure that they will have jobs for which to compete in a growing economy in Scotland?

Mr. Macdonald: I can certainly give my hon. Friend that assurance. He is right to say that the wider UK context of a strong economy is essential to deliver the goal of more apprenticeships which the new Scottish Parliament will try to achieve. There are around 1,500 modern apprenticeships in engineering, which I am sure will be welcome news to my hon. Friend given his constituency interests.

Mr. Archy Kirkwood (Roxburgh and Berwickshire): Will the Minister assure the House that the south-east Scotland and Scottish borders area will have its fair share of access to those new modern apprenticeships? Will he acknowledge the importance, in particular in such industries as textiles, of training, so that the industry can be promoted in the best possible way? Will he also acknowledge the importance of European Union structural funds to training, in addition to modern apprenticeships? When will he be in a position to announce the results as regards eligibility for European structural funds and the new regional selecive assistance maps for areas such as south-east Scotland? In making those decisions, will he take into account the economic difficulties that that region is facing?

Mr. Macdonald: On the latter point, the hon. Gentleman will be aware that there is a consultation period as regards the map. We will wait until the end of that period to find out what feedback we get before any

final decisions are taken. On modern apprenticeships and the textile industry, a number of industries are not as well-represented as they should be in the scheme. In the coming months, we will try to improve their profile, including that of the textile industry.

Mrs. Maria Fyfe (Glasgow, Maryhill): May I add my congratulations to the new Front-Bench team and ask my hon. Friend whether every effort will be made to ensure that as many of the apprenticeships as possible come to Glasgow? He will be well aware that the loss of jobs in Glasgow is not a recent event—it has been occurring for decades, and during the period in office of the previous Government many large businesses became small businesses or went out of business altogether. If we can create opportunities, I hope that something can be done for the young people of Glasgow.

Mr. Macdonald: My hon. Friend is right. I cannot give her the figures for the number of apprenticeships in Glasgow, but if we are to get young people back into employment, we need good skills and training, which is what the modern apprenticeships scheme is designed to achieve.

Tuition Fees

7. **Mr. Desmond Swayne** (New Forest, West): If he will make a statement about his plans for university tuition fees in Scotland. [84133]

The Secretary of State for Scotland (Dr. John Reid): I refer the hon Member to the answer that I gave to the hon. Member for Lichfield (Mr. Fabricant) a few moments ago.

Mr. Swayne: No, I asked the Secretary of State about his plan—his own plan—for tertiary education. He told my hon. Friend the Member for Lichfield (Mr. Fabricant) the plan for the Scottish Parliament. The Secretary of State still has more than a month in which to implement any plans that he may have. The right hon. Gentleman will be aware that, this academic year, students in Scotland will pay about £19 million in fees, but only £4 million will go to the institutions as additional funding. What did the Prime Minister mean when he said before the election that he had no intention of introducing such fees? Was it merely rhetoric—much like the rhetoric of the hon. and learned Member for Orkney and Shetland (Mr. Wallace)?

Dr. Reid: In the first place, I think that I answered the hon. Gentleman's question by saying that our plans had been outlined in July 1997. If he checks *Hansard* he will see that that was my answer before I referred to the Scottish Parliament's decision. I think that the gist of the hon. Gentleman's question is, "Are our plans good plans?" I think that they are not only good but fair. Most people would accept that, if we are trying to fund a fairly massive extension of entry to higher education, it is fair and reasonable to say that those on the average income or below will make no contribution towards fees—more than 50 per cent. of the recent intake were in that position. Those who are on slightly above average income should make some contribution and those who are on an income of £28,000 a year should pay the full amount, which is a maximum total of £1,000.

Those are reasonable plans that reflect not only the need for us all collectively to provide for the least privileged, but the increased earning capacity of those who have the benefit of education at universities or at higher level. The plans were and are reasonable. If the Scottish Parliament should decide that it has priorities in another direction or wishes to make a decision in a different fashion, that is a devolved power that it has. I am sure that in this country we can live with the reflection of local needs and priorities in a fashion that does not need the synthetic rage that the hon. Gentleman managed to conjure up.

Mr. Michael Moore (Tweeddale, Ettrick and Lauderdale): I add my congratulations to the Secretary of State on his new position and wish him every success. He is clearly enjoying it so far. Does he agree that the essence of devolution is that political problems and issues can have different solutions in different parts of the United Kingdom? Are not tuition fees a particularly good example of an instance where Scotland can have a different policy from the rest of the United Kingdom?

Dr. Reid: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his comments. On the question of enjoying it, it has been all right so far, but we have not gone a long way yet. His general proposition, that the essence of devolution is that we have to countenance the fact that people will make their own decisions within the areas prescribed to them, is correct. That is why I said in my first answer that I genuinely believe that the unity of the United Kingdom will be strengthened by a recognition of our diversity within these islands.

However, with rights go responsibilities for all of us. Whether in this Parliament, the Scottish Parliament or local councils, if people wish to put more money and resources towards a given priority, they have the obligation to explain to their constituents where they are taking the money from and why something else has been deprioritised. That applies to all of us. Provided that we all do that, and work with good will and partnership, I think that devolution in Scotland, and decentralisation throughout the United Kingdom, will be a great boon to the unity of this United Kingdom.

Genetically Modified Crops

8. **Mr. Norman Baker** (Lewes): What responsibilities in respect of genetically modified crops will be transferred to the Scottish Parliament. [84134]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Scotland (Mr. Calum Macdonald): Genetically modified crops are a devolved matter, so the Scottish Parliament will have competence to legislate in that area, within the parameters laid down in European Union legislation.

Mr. Baker: I am grateful for that answer. Will the Scottish Parliament be able to invoke article 16 of the 1990 EU directive 90/220 and ban the growing of Novartis maize, which the Minister will know has been banned in Austria and Luxembourg? If he cannot answer now, will he write to me? Will the Scottish Parliament be

able to stand up for the consumer, the farmer and the environmentalist in a way that the Minister for the Cabinet Office conspicuously failed to do last week?

Mr. Macdonald: I do not know about the specific crop that the hon. Gentleman mentioned or the situation in Austria or Luxembourg but a general moratorium on genetically modified crops is not legal under EU law, as I am sure that he realises. The important thing is to conduct trials responsibly. That is why the Government have a number of agencies at our disposal to provide advice, including the Advisory Committee on Releases to the Environment and the Advisory Committee on Novel Foods and Processes. Last Friday, two new commissions were set up: the Human Genetics Commission and the Agriculture and Environment Biotechnology Commission. The important thing is to ensure that the Scottish Parliament can get advice from those commissions operating on a UK-wide basis. That is what we intend.

Mr. Edward Leigh (Gainsborough): Apart from genetically modified crops, which issues likely to excite political interest are to be left to the Scottish Office and not covered by another United Kingdom Minister?

Mr. Macdonald: I think that the hon. Gentleman is repeating earlier questions. My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State gave the answer to all those questions; he operates—indeed the Scottish Office operates—both as a representative of the Scottish people within the British Cabinet and as a representative of the British Cabinet in Scotland and throughout the United Kingdom.

LORD CHANCELLOR'S DEPARTMENT

The Parliamentary Secretary was asked—

Immigration Adjudicators

29. **Fiona Mactaggart** (Slough): Pursuant to his answer of 23 March 1999, *Official Report*, column *133*, on immigration adjudicators, by what percentage the number of outstanding immigration appeals has been reduced; and what training has been undertaken by immigration adjudicators. [84157]

The Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department (Mr. Keith Vaz): Between the end of December and the end of April 1999, the total number of outstanding appeals to adjudicators fell by 54 per cent. Any case can now be heard within four weeks of receipt. There is an on-going training programme for new adjudicators and three dedicated training days have been held this year on recent developments in immigration law.

Fiona Mactaggart: I thank my hon. Friend for that reply—and may I be the first to congratulate him on his new responsibilities? As his answer reveals, there is some spare capacity caused by relatively slow processing of domestic immigration cases and statements by the Home Office. As he has shown in the past—for example, in the Adjournment debate that he secured in January this year—there is concern about the operation of entry clearance overseas. Would it be possible for him to take steps to ensure that a larger proportion than the current 17 per cent. of work done by adjudicators relates to people appealing against the decisions of entry clearance officers overseas? In my constituency, there are people who have waited for more than six months merely to have an interview. To have to wait longer thereafter for an appeal is unfair. My hon. Friend is faced with a great opportunity to speed up the process radically. Will he take it?

Mr. Vaz: I thank my hon. Friend for her kind comments. May I take the opportunity to acknowledge the dedicated and distinguished way in which my predecessor, my hon. Friend the Member for Ashfield (Mr. Hoon), now the Minister of State, Foreign and Commonwealth Office, held this post? I am sure that the whole House wishes him well in his new career.

It did not take my hon. Friend the Member for Slough (Fiona Mactaggart) long to remind me of what I said in January. The reduction in the number of outstanding cases has been remarkable. As I have been in the job for only seven days, I cannot take credit for that extraordinary achievement. My hon. Friend is aware that the issue of entry clearance officers and the way in which explanatory statements are issued by the posts abroad are matters for the Foreign Office. She is also aware that there are plans to improve that service by initiating pilot schemes—possibly even ensuring that some of the interviews are recorded. As for the Lord Chancellor's Department, we shall work with the Foreign Office and the Home Office, which has responsibility for dealing with such matters in this country, to ensure that the system is the best for the people who have applied and who have appealed. We shall ensure that the system is efficient, fair and quick.

Mr. Edward Garnier (Harborough): I join the hon. Member for Slough (Fiona Mactaggart) in congratulating my constituency neighbour on his promotion to the Lord Chancellor's Department as its Parliamentary Secretary. I trust that he will enjoy working with the Lord Chancellor as much as the hon. Member for Ashfield (Mr. Hoon) so clearly did.

Will the Minister tell the House why he thinks that the former Minister's reply, set out as a written answer at column *133* of *Hansard* of 23 March, is a proper and connected answer to the question asked at that time by the hon. Member for Slough?

Mr. Vaz: I thank the hon. and learned Gentleman for his kind comments. Clearly, Market Harborough and Leicester, East will often be together in the Chamber during the months to come.

Of course the answer is connected. My hon. Friend the Member for Slough asked whether the number of delays had improved. It has improved; the number of cases has gone down. In the last year of the previous Government, there were 34,000 outstanding appeals. Today, there are 7,113 outstanding appeals. That is a dramatic reduction. That is because the system works and because of the need to ensure that those cases are dealt with as quickly and as speedily as possible.

Magistrates

30. **Dr. Tony Wright** (Cannock Chase): What plans he has to review the retirement age for magistrates. [84158]

The Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department (Mr. Keith Vaz): The Lord Chancellor has no plans to review the retirement age for magistrates, which is 70 years of age, and broadly the same as for all holders of judicial office. The Lord Chancellor recognises the important contribution that older people can make and, for that reason, increased the upper age limit for appointment to 65 in 1997.

Dr. Tony Wright: I add my voice to the general congratulations offered to my hon. Friend.

I applaud the Lord Chancellor for moving the appointment age of magistrates from 55 to 65 two years ago, but does he not now need to take the next logical step and shift the retirement age? It surely makes no sense to recruit good, active people in their sixties if they are then forced to retire from the bench at 70. Having done one good thing, it is now time to do another.

Mr. Vaz: I thank my hon. Friend for his support for the Lord Chancellor's decision. As he knows, the retirement age of 70 for lay magistrates was approved by Parliament in 1968. The Lord Chancellor values the contribution that older people have made to the bench, but it is right that the bench should be as representative as possible of society as a whole. That is why the Lord Chancellor feels that the retirement age of 70 is appropriate, and it means that many people serve beyond the normal retirement age. A recent campaign to recruit more magistrates resulted in 14,000 inquiries. I think the whole House wants to see a bench that is truly representative of society. That is why we believe it is appropriate to keep the retirement age at 70.

Mr. Robert Maclennan (Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross): Does the Minister acknowledge that 30 years is a long time in politics and that it is not too soon to review the retirement age as the hon. Member for Cannock Chase (Dr. Wright) suggests? Many people over the age of 70 can continue to give good judicial service. They should leave the bench not because of their age but because they wish to do so or because of their evident unsuitability.

Mr. Vaz: The right hon. Gentleman knows that it is important to have an age limit, otherwise there is a risk that people will go on for ever—and that would not be appropriate. It is important to attract more young people into the magistracy. The Lord Chancellor normally appoints people aged over 27 and the age, ethnic and gender profiles have changed enormously in the past two years. I take the right hon. Gentlemen's point—it is a serious one—but I am sure he will agree that it is important that the bench should represent and reflect society.

Judges Council

31. **Mr. Andrew Dismore** (Hendon): If he will take steps to make the Judges Council publicly accountable. [84160]

The Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department (Mr. Keith Vaz): The Judges Council is wholly independent of Government. It is an informal judicial body that represents and supports the senior judiciary in the exercise of their constitutional functions. The independence of the judiciary must be respected.

Mr. Dismore: I join hon. Members in congratulating my hon. Friend on his promotion.

Does he agree with the assessment provided by the Library?

"The Council has no formal constitution, and as a collegiate body of judges who are themselves individually answerable to nobody, is formally answerable to no-one apart from those it represents. It meets six times a year, but its minutes are not published."

Bearing in mind the council's very important public functions—for example, making decisions about the outside interests of judges—does my hon. Friend agree that it is about time that, instead of allowing it to behave like a branch of MI5, we took a leaf out of the freedom of information book and put the Judges Council on a statutory footing?

Mr. Vaz: I thank my hon. Friend for his kind comments. I congratulate him on the fact that his remarks about judges in the Committee stage of the Access to Justice Bill have been selected as the quote of the week in the latest edition of *The Lawyer* magazine. The Judges Council is an independent body. It is quite right that the senior judiciary should feel that they can meet to discuss issues of concern, and it is also right that they should pass that advice to junior members of the judiciary. The Judges Council has not issued any instructions to anybody: it has merely given guidance. It is right that a body of this kind comprising senior judges should be able to do so.

I am not sure why my hon. Friend feels so strongly about judges. I hope to take some time off while in this job to introduce my hon. Friend to several judges. He will find that they are friendly people of enormous integrity—and some of them may even live in Hendon.

Crime and Disorder Partnerships

32. **Ms Hazel Blears** (Salford): What role magistrates will play in the local partnerships established under the Crime and Disorder Act 1998. [84161]

The Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department (Mr. Keith Vaz): The magistrates courts committees will be consulted on issues that affect the work of the courts and invited to participate in partnerships established under the Crime and Disorder Act. Magistrates have a good understanding of local crime and disorder problems and will be able to provide valuable insights into those issues. It is important to keep open channels of communication if local partnerships are to be effective.

Ms Blears: I welcome my hon. Friend to his new position, and I hope to explore with him his views about locally administered justice. Magistrates are clearly crucial to crime and disorder partnerships, particularly in implementing anti-social behaviour orders and administering new community-based punishments. It is important that local magistrates benches should administer justice locally from the magistrates courts. In Salford, the bench is very involved in the partnership and

administers justice locally. Does my hon. Friend agree that justice is best administered locally, within the community that the magistrates represent?

Mr. Vaz: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. I know of her interest in this matter and that, last year, she met the chairman of the Salford advisory committee to discuss how to increase the number of local magistrates and to broaden the nature of the bench. Those issues concern magistrates and magistrates courts committees. Although magistrates ought to be involved in those aspects of policy, it is important also that they are independent; they should not be involved in managing local strategies and they should never discuss individual cases. As long as those parameters are clear, we should support their role in ensuring that partnerships are successful.

Mr. Christopher Gill (Ludlow): Further to the hon. Lady's question, is the Minister aware of the serious concern expressed by magistrates in Shropshire about the prospect of the closure of custody units at police stations in market towns in the county? Will he take this opportunity to tell my constituents that he believes that it is important to retain the full range of services at police stations that serve local magistrates courts in market towns throughout Shropshire?

Mr. Vaz: Of course it is important that the full range of services is available, but clearly, in this case, local circumstances must be taken into account. If the hon. Gentleman feels strongly about the matter—this is the first time that he has brought it to my attention—and would like to discuss it with me, I will be happy to meet him and discuss it further.

Legal Aid (Coroners Courts)

34. **Mr. Colin Breed** (South-East Cornwall): What plans he has for the provision of legal aid for representation at coroners courts. [84163]

The Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department (Mr. Keith Vaz): The Government do not intend to extend the scope of legal aid to provide representation at coroners courts in most cases. Unlike most court proceedings, coroners inquests are inquisitorial. Providing publicly funded representation at inquests and inquiries should not be a priority for taxpayers' money. However, the Access to Justice Bill contains a provision to enable the Legal Services Commission to fund representation when exceptional circumstances warrant it.

Mr. Breed: I thank the Minister for his response—and Liberal Democrat Members, too, congratulate him on his new appointment. He will be aware of the tragic circumstances of one of my constituents, an 18-year-old girl who died last year in unexplained circumstances. Her mother would have found it extremely helpful to get professional advice and support to represent her views and those of others at the coroners court. The lack of such representation has led to further complications and disputes.

I accept the Minister's point about the Access to Justice Bill, but there is a small number of cases in which legal aid would not only assist the families but help to achieve justice.

Mr. Vaz: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his kind comments. The whole House feels for the family of Miss Andrews. I hope that he will pass on to her family my sympathy, as a parent, about the tragic circumstances of her case.

It is important that we prioritise legal aid money and that taxpayers' money should be directed to specific areas. There are exceptional circumstances in which advice and assistance can be given, but not in the cases referred to by the hon. Gentleman. I know that he has worked very hard on the case of Miss Andrews, and it is through his intervention that many of the agencies have opened up and provided her family with access to information. I thank him for that, and I will be happy to meet him and his constituent, Mrs. Andrews, if he thinks that such a meeting would be appropriate, provided that the discussion is not about legal aid. If the hon. Gentleman has found that there are problems in the workings of the system, I will be happy to meet him and discuss them.

County Courts (Staffordshire)

35. **Mr. Michael Fabricant** (Lichfield): If he will make a statement regarding the location of county courts in Staffordshire. [84164]

The Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department (Mr. Keith Vaz): There are five county courts in Staffordshire: Burton-upon-Trent, Stafford, Stoke-on-Trent, Tamworth and Lichfield.

Mr. Fabricant: May I say how pleased I am to see the hon. Gentleman in his position—in my view, it is two years overdue? He knows from our correspondence over the past few days that the future of the Lichfield county court is at risk. Does he agree that there is a role for a partnership between magistrates courts and county courts, if they can save costs by sharing the same buildings?

Mr. Vaz: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his kind comments. I shall miss him in the lifts at Norman Shaw North. One of the first letters that I received, inherited from my predecessor, was his letter. With his silver tongue, as he demonstrated today, he obviously persuaded my predecessor of the need to defer the closure of the court. He has an absolute assurance from me that nothing will happen until the three-month period is over. I know that he has ensured that there will be a meeting on 28 May, and I congratulate him on convening it. I await with great interest the outcome of that meeting, which will keep me informed. I shall then let the hon. Gentleman know my final decision.

Anti-Drugs Strategy

3.31 pm

The Minister for the Cabinet Office (Dr. Jack Cunningham): With permission, Madam Speaker, I should like to make a statement about the Government's anti-drugs strategy.

I am pleased to lay before the House today the United Kingdom anti-drugs co-ordinator's first annual report and plan. No one in the House needs to be reminded of the importance of our fight against drugs. Quite apart from the devastating effect that drugs can have on users, their families and their friends, they have serious implications for all of us in the wider community.

Illegal drugs, particularly heroin and cocaine, are a major cause of crime. A heroin or crack cocaine addict can require an illegal income of £10,000 to £20,000 each year simply to feed his or her habit. As a result, such addicts are responsible for a substantial proportion—some 30 per cent.—of all crime, particularly theft and burglary. Those figures are too compelling to be ignored. The Government are committed to addressing the causes of crime, as well as the consequences. If we can make a positive impact on drug misuse, we can say with some confidence that we will make a positive impact on crime.

The White Paper, "Tackling Drugs to Build a Better Britain", set out our 10-year strategy for reducing the use of drugs throughout our society. The report published today describes progress during the first year of the strategy and sets targets for the short, medium and long term. I am grateful to Keith Hellawell and his deputy, Mike Trace, for the work that they have done in preparing the report.

There are some positive messages to be drawn from the report. For the first time, departments and agencies nationally and locally are being brought together to work in partnership towards joint performance targets. The focus is on results and on working together across departmental boundaries, which reflects the proposals that we laid out in the modernising government White Paper.

The proposals in the annual report and plan will help us to meet the objectives that we agreed in the public service agreement on drugs. The agreement binds all relevant Departments to work together to deliver a reduction in the proportion of people under 25 who misuse illegal drugs; a reduction in the level of reoffending by drugs-misusing offenders; an increase in the participation of problem drug misusers, including prisoners, in drug treatment programmes which have a positive impact on health and in reducing crime; and a reduction in the access to drugs for young people.

Between now and 2002, all departmental and agency resources and activities against drugs will be increasingly redirected towards those and associated targets, as set out in the national plan. Departments have been allocated an additional £217 million for targeted anti-drugs activities. Existing resources in the criminal justice system will be progressively moved from dealing with the consequences of drug-related offences to programmes that enable offenders to tackle their drug problems.

There will, however, be no let up in our determination to pursue drug dealers. My right hon. Friend the Home Secretary has introduced a seven-year minimum sentence for third time, class A drug traffickers and we will continue to give the police every support in targeting such offenders.

Drug action teams will have a crucial role in the implementation of the strategy. During the past 12 months, drug action teams undertook a comprehensive planning process, which shows that a great deal of good work is already under way. I pay tribute to much excellent work done at local level by both the public and voluntary sectors. Their contribution is essential to our success. However, we must ensure that they have the support they need to build on that work. That is why we have created the drug prevention advisory service, which will provide drug action teams with an invaluable source of advice and support.

There is a regrettable shortage of reliable information about drug use, so we are putting in place better information systems to show more definitively what the drugs problems are, what works best against them and what is cost-effective. We shall spend an extra £6 million over the next three years to help to fund a major new research programme to establish accurate baselines.

Additional support for the strategy and its objectives will be provided by partnership with the private sector and by channelling the assets seized from convicted drugs traffickers back into action against them and their crimes. I am pleased to be able to announce that £3 million will be available from that source in 1999–2000, which is to be increased in future years. The illegal gains of drug dealers will be used to tackle the problems that they generate.

In line with our commitment under the public service agreement, the national plan sets key performance targets for the medium and long term. For young people, we aim to reduce the proportion of people under 25 reporting use of illegal drugs in the past month and the previous year substantially, and to reduce the proportion of young people using the drugs which cause the greatest harm—heroin and cocaine—by 25 per cent. by 2005 and by 50 per cent. by 2008.

In our communities, we will reduce the level of repeat offending among drug misusing offenders by 25 per cent. by 2005 and by 50 per cent. by 2008. In the treatment sector, we will increase the participation of problem drug misusers, including prisoners, in drug treatment programmes, which have a positive impact on health and crime, by 66 per cent. by 2005 and by 100 per cent. by 2008.

In seeking to limit availability, our aim is to reduce access to all drugs among young people under 25 significantly, and to reduce access to the drugs that cause the greatest harm—heroin and cocaine—by 25 per cent. by 2005 and by 50 per cent. by 2008. Those medium and long-term targets link directly with the strategy's vision of shifting the emphasis from dealing with the consequences of drug misuse to prevention of that misuse. They are supported by a range of shorter-term targets for the next year and the next three years.

For example, by 2002, we propose to reduce the number of 11 to 16-year-olds who use class A drugs by 20 per cent.; during 1999–2000, we will double the number of face-to-face arrest referral schemes and the number of arrestees referred to and entering treatment programmes; during the next year, we will also establish in all prisons a comprehensive treatment framework to improve the assessment, advice and support of prisoners; and by 2002, we plan to increase by a third the amount of assets seized from drug traffickers.

The past year has been about preparing the ground for the implementation of the strategy. The new initiatives and the targets I have announced today show the way forward. I recognise that this is a difficult task, and progress will depend on commitment to the policy and careful monitoring of the outcomes. There are no easy solutions, which us why our strategy is for a 10-year programme. I believe that our targets are achievable. They will help to deliver our society from the problems created by drug misuse.

Mrs. Ann Winterton (Congleton): Conservative Members welcome the publication of the first drugs annual report and action plan by the United Kingdom anti-drugs co-ordinator. I thank the Minister for allowing me to have a copy a little earlier this afternoon: I much appreciated that.

The report sets out targets for the short, medium and long term, and encourages Departments and agencies to work in partnership at both local and national level. It must be said, however, that the very sharpness of the targets in the report contrasts markedly with the lack of clarity in the baseline of the underlying problem.

The whole House remains supportive of the four objectives outlined in last year's White Paper, "Tackling Drugs to Build a Better Britain": to reduce the use of illegal drugs by young people, to protect our communities from drug-related crime, to provide effective drug treatment programmes and to stifle the availability of drugs on the streets.

The drug problem in the United Kingdom often appears intractable, and, sadly, appears to be growing. The supply of, for example, heroin and cocaine is increasing, while the street price of those and other drugs is falling. In the statement, the Government expressed their intention of focusing more on class A drugs. Will the Minister confirm, however, that they have no plans to decriminalise the use of cannabis or other class B drugs? Will he reaffirm that to take any illegal substance is plainly wrong, addictive and dangerous?

We know that young people aged between 10 and 17 are being targeted by pushers, and that the number of those taking hard drugs such as heroin and cocaine is rising. We support all steps to protect young people from those who peddle drugs—including their contemporaries—by ensuring that they have the knowledge and social skills to withstand peer pressure. Education directed at prevention is vital, and must receive the full support and involvement of parents and families. Does the Minister agree, however, that young people who are older—old enough to vote, for instance, or to leave home—having been taught the difference between right and wrong, must accept responsibility for their actions? The buck stops with each individual, and we must not make excuses for their illegal drug-taking.

We welcome the targets announced for treatment programmes, including programmes for people in prison, bearing in mind that at present there is a waiting time of approximately 15 weeks. Is the Minister confident that sufficient resources are available to deliver those ambitious targets? Will he comment on Professor Howard Parker's observation on the "Today" programme this morning that the new wave of drug-taking was unforeseen, that it would strain the Government's strategy, and that the Government might not reach some of their goals?

I recall that the drug treatment and testing orders were to be in the vanguard of the Government's policy. Does the Minister accept that take-up has been extremely poor? Only 67 orders have been made, of which 10 have been revoked, in the three pilot areas where hundreds, if not thousands, of drug cases have gone before the criminal courts. Is the Minister satisfied that the budget of £40 million for the scheme, when it is fully implemented next year, is enough, given that each order costs approximately £6,000? That means that only about 6,600 orders can be made throughout the United Kingdom.

The availability of drugs on our streets is growing. We acknowledge the Government's action in retaining 300 Customs and Excise officers, but does the Minister accept that there are continuing problems in the service, with a possible reduction of more than 1,000 jobs over the next three years, which will directly and adversely affect drug intelligence and anti-smuggling measures?

The United Kingdom has an advantage in being an island, so that drugs must arrive by sea or air, other than through the channel tunnel. That is in marked contrast to countries in mainland Europe, where border controls are noticeably absent. Customs officers are uniquely placed to detect drugs at ports, airports and around remote coastlines. Minor entry points are receiving a growing share of high-risk traffic. Why, therefore, are there to be reductions in the intelligence unit in the west country, and why is the highly successful Plymouth drug detection dog unit to be closed? Will that not have a direct impact on the growing availability of drugs on our streets?

The right hon. Gentleman asserted in his statement that there would be no abatement of efforts to pursue drug dealers. We endorse that statement wholeheartedly. At least 80 per cent. of intelligence development work is linked to drugs. Is the Minister satisfied that we have enough officers in the field overseas and enough police here to follow through that policy? Police numbers are falling, and that is a worrying trend.

In supporting the Government's objectives, I express the hope that words will be backed by deeds. The perception of people in the United Kingdom towards drugs policy is all important. They want to see effective deterrence to drug use and drug trafficking, and they want tough penalties to be imposed. They want their local communities to be cleaned up. They are looking to the House for a lead to show that there is no soft message on drugs. The war on drugs must be waged with energy, drive and commitment if we are to succeed in protecting our children from their insidious consequences.

Dr. Cunningham: I am grateful for the hon. Lady's general welcome and support, and I agree with much of what she had to say. There is a problem with baseline information, as I said in my statement and as she emphasised. The information is not available because the situation and policies that we inherited were not focused, not co-ordinated and not based on any hard information. That is the reality that we discovered, and why we have taken time and are investing £6 million of new resources in trying to improve the robustness of the baseline figures.

The hon. Lady is absolutely right that it is essential that we do that. None of that work had been done. One of the plus points of developing a new strategy in this area is that we will obtain that information. We do not have robust baselines, but we know what the trends are, and, as the

[Dr. Cunningham]

hon. Lady said, they are in the wrong direction. We have some information to go on, but I want to be clear with everyone—as I have been in the interviews that I have given—that I believe that that is not good enough, and that we need to improve the credibility of the information on which we base our plans.

We have no plans or proposals to decriminalise cannabis. The hon. Lady rightly said that the public expect us to take the toughest possible line against drug abuse and the crime related to it. Therefore, I repeat that there will be no softening of policy in this area. She is quite right to say that all drugs present dangers to young people, which is why education, advice and support is so important.

This morning, Keith Hellawell and I visited Camden girls school. I pay tribute to and thank the head teacher, Geoffrey Fallows, and his staff. We saw excellent work being done with young people in this area. That work is essential, so we have allocated an extra £217 million for that aspect, and will progressively shift resources—the £1.4 billion that we currently spend on all drugs-related issues—in the direction of education, information, advice, treatment and rehabilitation and away from dealing merely with the consequences of drug abuse and drug-related crime.

The hon. Lady referred to young people over the age of 18. With their freedoms and rights must come responsibilities; they must face the consequences of their actions. However, the policy must try to prevent them from getting into trouble with drugs in the first place.

As we know, we have some of the toughest custodial sentencing policies of any country in Europe, but we still have one of the worst records on drugs-related problems of any country in Europe. It is not that the courts do not have strong powers; it is not that we have not already strengthened those powers—it is that we are not dealing with the root cause of the problem early enough. That is the biggest single argument for the shift in policy that we are bringing about.

I am pleased that the hon. Lady welcomed the setting of targets. I know that they will be difficult to achieve—no one knows that better than me; I have been looking at the matter for a year. However, without targets and without benchmarks against which we can gauge progress—or not—we will simply remain in the dark. We will not know whether policies are working, whether we need to adjust them, or whether we need to change the allocation of resources. We are taking something of a risk. We are exposing ourselves by setting those tough targets, but we must have something to aim at and against which to gauge the success, or otherwise, of our policies.

I did hear Professor Parker this morning, and there is something in what he says. Unhappily, although seizures of illegal drugs have increased tenfold, availability on the streets has not declined. We know that heroin is available at higher quality, in greater purity and cheaper than ever before. The increasing availability of class A drugs such as heroin poses a real threat to our young people. We have to get to grips with the problem.

Of course, the drug testing and treatment orders are in the early stages—

Mr. James Clappison (Hertsmere): They only scratch the surface.

Dr. Cunningham: That is an absurd thing to say. They have only been introduced relatively recently.

Mr. Clappison: Seven months.

Dr. Cunningham: Seven months, the hon. Gentleman says. How long does the drugs problem in this country go back? What was his party doing for 18 years. We are deliberately piloting the orders so that we can gauge their effectiveness, or lack of it. If they are shown not to be an efficient use of resources, we will have to make changes. The hon. Gentleman's comment demonstrates a complete lack of understanding of the nature of the problem and how we are trying to deal with it.

It would be unusual if there were not some major difference of opinion on such a statement between the Government and those on the Opposition Front Bench. I again pay tribute to the hon. Member for Congleton (Mrs. Winterton) for her measured response. However, when she said what she did about Customs officers, I parted company from her because it was her Government and her party that supported a reduction of 500 Customs officers and planned a further reduction of 300. It was only this Government, on election in May 1997, who prevented that further reduction. As a result of the comprehensive spending review, my right hon. Friend the Chancellor gave more resources for use in the sector.

As the hon. Lady knows, increasingly the interception of drugs is intelligence led; it is not a matter simply of the number of people on the ground any more. She was right to say that we need to work hard with our partners in Europe and in the United Nations, as we are doing first, to improve our intelligence and understanding of the cartels, and secondly, to eliminate at source the growth in production of drugs.

With that one difference of opinion with the hon. Lady, I again welcome warmly what she had to say about the policy.

Several hon. Members *rose—*

Madam Speaker: Order. That initial exchange took 25 minutes. I hope that we might now proceed in a much more brisk fashion.

Mr. Chris Mullin (Sunderland, South): I welcome my right hon. Friend's statement as clear evidence that the Government are taking very seriously this very serious and debilitating problem, and that they are putting their money where their mouth is. I particularly welcome the proposal to spend about £60 million in prisons, where—as we have a captive audience—there is a window of opportunity to deal with a very serious problem.

May I ask for my right hon. Friend's assurance that all outcomes will be properly monitored? In the past, in relation to community sentences and the Probation Service, one thing that we have discovered is that, of the several hundred schemes in existence, only a handful were

able to produce sufficiently rigorous figures for us to make any serious judgment on outcomes—which, given the rigorous targets that he has set, will be essential.

Dr. Cunningham: I am grateful to my hon. Friend. I am not so sure about windows of opportunity in prisons, but I agree that we need rigorously to examine all the programmes and schemes to determine first, whether they are working and delivering the outcomes that we want; and secondly, whether we are getting value for money from the schemes. If not, we shall have to change them.

Mr. A. J. Beith (Berwick-upon-Tweed): Is the Minister aware that we strongly support the work that Keith Hellawell is doing, and the work that others are doing in co-ordination with him? However, does the right hon. Gentleman realise that the targets—which he has called difficult—even if achieved, pre-suppose a continuing very large drug problem in the United Kingdom? Is he aware that we want to encourage much wider use of drug testing and treatment orders? Indeed, is he aware that we are interested in the idea of drugs courts—which have been quite successful in the United States in discouraging reoffending? We need more drug treatment programmes in the community. Where there is a waiting list for drug treatment programmes, people will get into drug-based criminality sooner.

Does the Minister know that, today, the RAC Foundation has announced a campaign on driving and drugs? Will he give as much backing as possible to that campaign? Many deaths result from drugs and driving, and much could be done about them through labelling and by informing the public. Does the right hon. Gentleman recognise how much has been achieved by the hardening of public attitudes against drinking and driving? With the whole drugs problem, is it not true that there will be a very major change only when the public come to recognise and convey to others that the dangers posed by drugs and drugs misuse are such that people should not use them? The change of attitude that has happened on drinking and driving could happen with drugs. Currently, however, any change is not going the right direction.

Dr. Cunningham: I am grateful to the right hon. Gentleman for his strong support for what we are trying to achieve. Of course he is right to say that, even if our ambitious targets are fulfilled, a large and serious problem would remain. I listened to what he said about drugs courts, and he knows that some attention has been paid to the idea.

Drug treatment facilities in the community are not adequate, and there is a danger that people will have to wait so long that they will simply never receive any treatment. We are examining that issue, too.

As I am sure the right hon. Gentleman is aware, driving and drugs is already an offence. We are examining with the police the possibility of roadside testing for drugs abuse while driving a car, but we are not yet in a position to make a statement on that.

Mr. Paul Flynn (Newport, West): I welcome what seem to be two slight changes of direction in the Government's policy, and in that of all other Governments: the emphasis being placed on treating those who use hard drugs not as criminals, but as patients; and the way in which the Government are placing the greatest emphasis on hard drugs.

Sadly and tragically, however, the Government face the same fate—which is the result of years and years of failure—as every other Government of the past 20 years. In three years, when we face the electorate, the drugs problem will be far worse than it was when we came into office. In Britain, however, one awful new feature of that failure does not occur in any other country—the epidemic of heroin use among teenagers and younger children.

Is not the best way to tackle this not to spend 90 per cent. of our money and police and court time pursuing soft drugs, which the majority of young people use, but to try to collapse the evil trade in those drugs, which is in the hands of criminals? The only way that can be done—and it has been done in other countries—is to replace it with a market that can be regulated, licensed, policed and controlled. In Holland, that approach has spectacularly reduced the use of heroin. Can we not take a fresh look at what is happening in other countries, including Holland and Switzerland? Instead of repeating our old failures, we should imitate the success of others.

Dr. Cunningham: I am grateful for the first part of my hon. Friend's remarks. We are increasing the focus on class A drugs and on treatment, education, advice and rehabilitation. We think that is the right thing to do.

My hon. Friend says that our policies will meet the fate of all previous ones. I do not accept that as inevitable; it is a defeatist attitude. We deliberately set a long-term strategy—a 10-year programme—in the White Paper and we are at the very beginning of that programme. My hon. Friend may well be right to say that we face an epidemic—a huge increase in the use of heroin—and we must do our best to prepare for that, but I do not agree with him at all that we should decriminalise cannabis. All drugs are harmful and there is plenty of evidence around to suggest that not only soft drugs but alcohol and smoking at an early age are the precursors to later hard drug use among young people.

Sir Brian Mawhinney (North-West Cambridgeshire): Given that over many years under Governments of both parties Britain has developed one of the worst records of drug abuse in Europe, why does the Minister believe that continuing the existing strategic thinking and the presuppositions that underlie current policy will be any more effective in the future than it has been in the past?

Dr. Cunningham: The right hon. Gentleman is wrong. We are not continuing with existing thinking and the policies and assumptions that we inherited from the previous Administration. Precisely because we recognised that they were not working and that changes had to be made, we produced the White Paper, set the 10-year strategy and are changing the emphasis towards education and information, support, help and advice, and rehabilitation; and we are moving resources accordingly. We are doing that because previous policies were not working, as the right hon. Gentleman rightly said.

Dr. Brian Iddon (Bolton, South-East): I too congratulate my right hon. Friend on shifting the emphasis to treatment and on the proposed concentration of enforcement measures on class A drugs. Is he aware that recent surveys have shown that the number of treatment places has fallen during the past three years, and that that is a real problem? There are just not enough people to deal

[Dr. Brian Iddon]

with drug addicts; even general practitioners are unable to cope with the problem. There is also a lack of available treatment, particularly for under-18-year-olds who are increasingly becoming addicted to substances such as heroin. Will the Government take urgent measures to train people up to deal with what is apparently an increasing problem?

Dr. Cunningham: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for his support and pay tribute to his excellent work as chair of the all-party drugs group. The Government issued clinical guidelines which were warmly welcomed by doctors. We are looking at providing more training and bringing together various agencies in local communities with the drugs action teams exactly because we need to bring more concentrated professional attention to these matters.

Mr. David Davis (Haltemprice and Howden): I welcome the Minister's commitment to better information and draw his attention to the Public Accounts Committee report on drug smuggling that was published last week. The Committee was unpersuaded by the information supporting the effectiveness of the so-called intelligence-led strategy and the prosecution strategy pursued by Customs and Excise. I am concerned that the circumstantial evidence that he mentioned—namely, falling prices and the greater volume of drugs on the streets—suggests that that strategy may not be as effective as we would hope. Loth as I am to recommend another review, I ask the Minister to review the strategy, because that is the only way to stop youngsters getting drugs.

Dr. Cunningham: I have great respect for the work of the Public Accounts Committee and the views of the right hon. Gentleman, who is its Chairman. I freely acknowledged earlier that, although seizures have increased tenfold, the availability of class A drugs on the streets has not diminished. We need to do more if we are to make a significant impact, so we shall keep the issue under review.

Laura Moffatt (Crawley): I warmly welcome today's announcement on the first annual report on the drug tsar's work. Does my right hon. Friend agree that the work of the drug action teams is important? I hope that he will congratulate the West Sussex drug action team on its work with voluntary organisations. The fact that an organisation is voluntary does not mean that it is not professional and does not do excellent work. That work needs to be evaluated to avoid duplication. Will the Minister ensure that the work is effective and that there is a proper distribution of work in communities so as to reflect the needs of those communities?

Dr. Cunningham: I am grateful to my hon. Friend. We are in the process of evaluating all drug action teams. Some are excellent, but others are not so good and their performance needs to be improved. We have developed a template of good practice for them all to study and use. I pay tribute again, as I did in my statement, to the excellent work done by some voluntary organisations nationally and locally. They are an important part of our strategy and teamwork.

Rev. Martin Smyth (Belfast, South): I join those who welcome the report. We have a growing problem in Northern Ireland, as the right hon. Gentleman is aware. We do not accept some of the direct action taken against drug dealers, including murder.

I have two points for the Minister. Is there a need for a change to legislation so as to prevent drug carriers from being able to insist on not being examined internally, meaning in effect that any doctor subsequently examining them could be guilty of assault? Secondly, the report says that there has been a decrease in the number of treatment centres. Sometimes they are in the wrong place. The need for the prison and probation services to protect funds may not allow enough money to be released to help get people off drugs at an earlier stage. Could more funds be allocated?

Dr. Cunningham: I am not sure about the first point that the hon. Gentleman mentioned, but I shall look into it with my colleagues. I acknowledge that there is a lack of facilities in some parts of the country and that in other areas the facilities are subject to such huge demand that people have to wait too long for access to treatment. We have allocated an additional £217 million. We shall shift resources to deal with the problem over time, but I cannot announce any additional resources today.

Mr. David Lock (Wyre Forest): I, too, welcome the report. I met the police in my constituency on Friday last week. Their drugs arrests are up by 250 per cent. over and above their target. I am sure that my right hon. Friend would like to pass on his thanks to them. Does he share their frustration that, having arrested people for possession with intent to supply or other drugs offences, they are unable to get them on to treatment programmes? That continues the cycle of offending.

Does my right hon. Friend agree that the beneficiaries of an increase in the number of treatment programmes would be not only the addicts, but those who would otherwise be the victims of crime? They should be the focus of the Government's policy on drugs.

Dr. Cunningham: I am grateful for my hon. Friend's support and I congratulate his local police authority on its performance. He made the same point as several other hon. Members have made, and I agree that we need to look closely at the availability of drug treatment centres for people, whether they have been arrested or not. We shall do that, and as we are able to move resources we shall continue to focus them on that area of policy. That is the important change in policy that I announced earlier today. We shall ensure that over time more resources are brought to bear on treatment and its availability.

Mr. Graham Brady (Altrincham and Sale, West): What proposals do the Government have for dealing with the menace of used needles, which are often found in parks and school playgrounds? They are a problem for those who are not themselves involved in taking drugs. In particular, will the right hon. Gentleman review a number of the so-called needle exchange programmes, which do not exchange needles but simply distribute them? Can the Government do anything to ensure that dirty needles are taken out of circulation?

Dr. Cunningham: I understand that in the best practices needles are exchanged regularly, and we should encourage everyone to follow best practice. I acknowledge that that is

not always done and that can cause a risk to the public, in respect of both drug addiction and AIDS. We must continue to encourage the development of best practice on that issue.

Mr. Ivan Henderson (Harwich): May I inform my right hon. Friend that last week in my constituency two deaths were caused by the taking of heroin? Does he share my thoughts at this sad time for those families? I see the work of Customs in my area at first hand, and they—and our local police—do an excellent job of detecting drugs and of educating in our local schools. What more can the Government do to ensure that young people and children understand the dangers and possibly fatal consequences of taking such drugs? Would it be possible to include parents in drug education in schools?

Dr. Cunningham: Of course it is a tragedy when any young person—or anyone—dies from drugs misuse. If there have been two deaths in my hon. Friend's constituency recently, I extend my sympathies and those of the Government to the families involved. That is a graphic illustration of the dangers to people from drugs misuse.

Drugs misuse is not glamorous and it should never be glamorised. It should never be associated with success or with being cool. Drugs destroy lives, they disrupt families and they wreck careers. Drugs misuse almost inevitably ends in disaster for the people involved—sometimes imprisonment and sometimes, as my hon. Friend points out, death. That is the message that we have to bring home to young people everywhere and that is why we are concentrating resources on education, information and advice to the most vulnerable young people in society. I assure my hon. Friend that we shall continue to do so.

Mr. Phil Willis (Harrogate and Knaresborough): I am sure that the Minister has not had a chance to read today's *Yorkshire Post*, but the headline reads

"Heroin epidemic sweeps through rural Yorkshire".

Does he agree that until now we have mistakenly believed that the drugs epidemic is something that happens in urban areas, in inner cities and in deprived areas? In fact, it is spreading like wildfire, especially into the more affluent rural areas which do not have the infrastructure to support the clinics or the policing of the problem. I noticed that the Minister's statement did not refer to rural areas specifically, but that is not a criticism of him. Does he have any specific plans to address the deficit in our rural areas?

Dr. Cunningham: On the last point, I did not refer to urban areas either, but was speaking about the country as a whole. I can assure the hon. Gentleman that, having represented a remote rural area for 29 years, I recognise that these problems affect communities in all parts of the country. No community, rural or urban, is safe from the drug pushers and traffickers. For that reason, the policies are intended to cover the whole of the country.

I agree that some people mistakenly believe that these are inner-city problems only. They are not. I do not agree that drugs problems are spreading like wildfire, to use the hon. Gentleman's words, but they are serious and we need to be more effective in tackling them. That is what our strategy and the plan announced today aim to do.

Dr. Tony Wright (Cannock Chase): I commend my right hon. Friend on his report, and I commend too all the people whose work he has described. However, is it not the sad truth that much of the work described in the report is undermined whenever the people to whom the young look up, such as pop or sports stars, are found to be users—often conspicuous users—of the hardest of hard drugs? What can he and the Government do to proclaim the message that those who have and exercise responsibility should behave responsibly too?

Dr. Cunningham: I very much agree with my hon. Friend. As I was just saying, public figures who glamorise drug taking, or who falsely present it as a good or fashionable thing that everyone does, perform a very damaging disservice to the young people of this country. There can be no compromise on the very hard line that we have to take with such examples, which of course undermine everything that the Government and the various local agencies are trying to achieve in raising young people's awareness of the dangers that they face by getting involved in the misuse of drugs.

Recently, there has been a series of high profile cases such as my hon. Friend described. I can only say that they are very damaging to the well-being of this country's young people.

Mr. Peter L. Pike (Burnley): I accept that my right hon. Friend rightly wants to reduce the waiting time at treatment centres, which will benefit drug users and the wider public. However, does the report identify where waiting lists are unacceptably long? In which parts of the country are the lists longer than the average to which he referred? Is priority action being taken in those areas to ensure that the health authorities and other relevant local organisations take the action needed to deal with the problem?

Dr. Cunningham: The report does not specify those areas, but we are aware of where the problems occur, and are learning more all the time. We are therefore identifying those areas in which we must concentrate resources and activity. That is the work of the local drugs action teams, among others. As I have said, we are assessing their effectiveness. In due course, we shall produce a report on that work. My hon. Friend is right to draw attention to the fact that in some parts of the country the availability of treatment centres is inadequate. We need to work hard to improve that.

Mr. Michael Connarty (Falkirk, East): I thank my right hon. Friend for the vigorous and determined tone of his statement, in relation to both class B and class A drugs. I know that he is a great advocate of joined-up government, and I note that with him on the Front Bench today is my hon. Friend the Member for Knowsley, North and Sefton, East (Mr. Howarth). My hon. Friend, who is Under-Secretary of State for the Home Department, will shortly be going to Colombia, where I was recently. In that country, a multinational industry has grown up in the production of cocaine and, now, of heroin, even though poppies do not grow naturally there.

Will my right hon. Friend assure the House and the country that this domestic report is linked to a determination to help the international fight against drugs? That fight is being conducted by bodies such as the anti-narcotics police in Colombia and Europol in Europe, through which new supply routes set up by the Russian

[Mr. Michael Connarty]

mafia bring more and more heroin and cocaine into this country, for use in the domestic market and for onward export to America.

Dr. Cunningham: I am grateful for my hon. Friend's support. I can confirm that we are addressing those matters internationally through the United Nations and by bilateral co-operation with, for example, the United States of America in the Caribbean. My hon. Friend is right to point out that we are confronted by huge, powerful, multinational cartels determined, for their own illegal gain, to supply class A drugs to our country and to others. They show no concern for the appalling damage and consequences that will result from their action. Through the Foreign Office, the Home Office and any other body, we shall seek more effective international co-operation.

Point of Order

Mr. Jim Murphy (Eastwood): On a point of order, Madam Speaker, of which I have given the hon. Member for Woodspring (Dr. Fox) notice. Scotland has a tradition of tolerance, but during Scottish questions today, the hon. Gentleman linked Scottish devolution with the balkanisation of Britain. It was a shameful soundbite, and I wonder whether you are able to invite the hon. Gentleman to withdraw it.

Madam Speaker: Order. That is a matter of argument, not a point of order. There is nothing in it for me to resolve.

Waiting Times (National Health Service)

4.21 pm

Mr. David Amess (Southend, West): I beg to move,

That leave be given to bring in a Bill to require the publication of average patient waiting times for first outpatient appointments by specialty and average patient waiting times for treatment by specialty; and for connected purposes.

The national health service is in crisis. If my Bill becomes law, it will force the Government to address that crisis. The children, women and men who use the NHS are not concerned about the length of waiting lists. What worries them is waiting times, particularly for more serious illnesses.

Only today, an article has appeared telling us that a rising number of patients must wait more than six months to see a hospital doctor. The patients charter says that no one should face a delay of more than 26 weeks after being referred to a specialist. Yet by the end of March, 153,000 people had waited 26 weeks or more for a first consultation, and the number was up from 144,000 in the previous quarter.

My Bill is supported by my hon. Friends, who know that it is right. If any Liberal Democrats were interested in the NHS, they might have supported it too. The best that can be said of them, however, is that they like to be popular. Labour Members should also support the Bill as it meets their No. 1 priority—transparency. The Labour party is anxious to be seen to be transparent. If the Bill becomes law it will be transparent to all that the Labour Government have made an awful mess of our NHS since 1 May 1997.

The size of the waiting list is irrelevant to the patient. What matters is how long patients must wait for an operation. Patients have good reason for worrying about that. They may be in pain, or their condition may be deteriorating. A long list does not necessarily mean a long wait. Many patients could be quickly put through hospital in the days of the excellent Conservative Government, but that—sadly—happens no more.

Waiting lists are easily distorted, massaged and controlled, and we know of the Government's expertise in those areas. Waiting times to see consultants have increased, so that it takes far longer to get on a list at all. There are waiting lists for waiting lists for waiting lists. Waiting lists are also gatekeeper-controlled now. It is relatively easy to remove or recategorise patients who are on a waiting list for sound clinical reasons, but it is also easy to do so for more dubious motives.

Waiting list figures are not now comparable to those of five years ago because more stringent criteria are being applied before anyone is placed on a waiting list.

Management and direction of NHS resources based on waiting lists is a distortion of clinical need. Doctors prioritise patients according to clinical need and the urgency involved. Attempts simply to cut waiting lists for operation X, as this Government do all the time, mean that routine cases—for instance a non-life-threatening hernia operation—might be re-prioritised and performed sooner than an operation for a more serious condition.

That is why it is essential to know how long a patient waits to be seen in an out-patients department and how long it takes to be placed on a waiting list by medical or surgical specialty. It is important to know not merely the average time, but the mode and range of waiting times. Obviously, a mathematical average can hide a variety of unpleasant surprises. If two patients are on a waiting list, one could wait 20 months and the other two. The average would be 11 months, but we have to consider the circumstances of the person who has to wait 20 months.

When in opposition, the Labour party used to wine and dine with the British Medical Association all the time. It appears that the BMA will support my Bill. It does not want people to wait for an unacceptably long time in pain and distress. It believes that waiting lists are rationing by the back door—in that, it is entirely right. Under the present system, a patient may be waiting in pain for a hip replacement in a queue behind someone with a benign and non-urgent skin condition. To meet performance targets, the patient with the non-urgent skin condition must be treated first if he or she has reached the 18-month list.

Then, of course, we have Her Majesty's Government's six fiddles on the waiting list. First, they have a subsidiary waiting list; secondly, a waiting list for the waiting list; thirdly, the withdrawal of routine operations; fourthly, prioritisation; fifthly, an administrative clean-up; and sixthly, reduced referral rates from general practitioners. That is an absolute disgrace.

I happen to have in my hand a letter. The person who wrote it will remain anonymous, but the letter mentions the specialties of general surgery, urology, orthopaedics and gynaecology. This very important person on a national health service trust writes:

"I am informed that the patient's current position on the waiting list is irrelevant. The aim of the Trust is simply to reduce the waiting list to the numbers previously agreed with the Purchasing Authority."

That just about says it all.

I have been inundated with letters from the general public complaining about the length of time that they have to wait for operations. Mrs. X needs a heart bypass and she has an indefinite wait. Mrs. Y needs a hearing test and she has an indefinite wait. Mrs. Z needs an X-ray and she has an indefinite wait. Mr. X has a pain in the leg and he has an indefinite wait.

Mr. Sizer had an X-ray on 11 November 1997. He wrote to tell me that it was found that he had osteoarthritis. He says:

"I might get my operation in August 99."

That is an absolute disgrace.

A doctor has written to me to say:

"patients are waiting up to fifteen months before they are seen for the first time by a specialist and they are then put on a waiting list, where they will wait eighteen months before admission."

A Mr. Bartlam has written to me saying that in January 1998 he tore a ligament in his right shoulder. It will be more than two years from the time he suffered the injury before he is dealt with by the hospital. He writes:

"Can you imagine having excruciating pain in your shoulder together with only limited use of your left arm for 2 years?"

Finally, another doctor has written to me saying that he is attempting to treat a patient at a local hospital. The patient has been waiting about three months to date. On recent inquiries the doctor was told that the neurophysiology wait is at least 18 months and the orthopaedic wait 12 to 18 months.

[Mr. David Amess]

There are even two people working in the House who have told me today about their cases. One has skin cancer, the other arthritis in both knees; neither can get anything done. I hope that the whole House will support the Bill because if it becomes law, it will be clearly seen that the national health service is in crisis, and that the only people to blame are the Government. Perhaps we might get the opportunity to elect a Government, a Conservative Government, who will sort the NHS out.

Question put and agreed to.

Bill ordered to be brought in by Mr. David Amess, Mrs. Angela Browning, Sir Sydney Chapman, Mr. Michael Fabricant, Mr. Andrew Lansley, Mr. Edward Leigh, Miss Anne McIntosh, Mr. John Randall, Mrs. Marion Roe, Mr. Robert Syms, Mr. Andrew Tyrie and Mr. Robert Walter.

WAITING/TIMES (NATIONAL HEALTH SERVICE)

Mr. David Amess accordingly presented a Bill to require the publication of average patient waiting times for first outpatient appointments by specialty and average patient waiting times for treatment by specialty; and for connected purposes: And the same was read the First time; and ordered to be read a Second time on Friday 11 June, and to be printed [Bill 111].

European Union

[Relevant documents: Developments in the European Union July-December 1998 (Cm. 4352);

The Second Report from the Agriculture Committee, Session 1998–99, on CAP Reform: Rural Development (HC 61) and the Government's Response thereto (HC 441);

The Third Report from the Defence Committee, Session 1998–99, on The Future of NATO: The Washington Summit (HC 39) and the Government's Response thereto (HC 459);

The Third Report from the Foreign Affairs Committee, Session 1998–99, on European Union Enlargement (HC 86);

Minutes of Evidence taken before the Foreign Affairs Committee on 19th May 1999 on the Cologne European Council (HC 462-i);

The First Report from the International Development Committee, Session 1998–99, on The Future of the EC Development Budget (HC 44).]

Motion made, and Question proposed, That this House do now adjourn.—*[Mr. Allen.]*

4.31 pm

The Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs (Mr. Robin Cook): The Cologne Council takes place against the background of the conflict in Kosovo. That provides a sombre backdrop for the meetings of the Heads of Government and Foreign Ministers, and will dominate much of our political discussion. It is, therefore, right that I should start this debate by addressing that conflict.

President Milosevic took three gambles when he launched his spring offensive in Kosovo. All three now look like losing bets. The first was that NATO would not have the stomach for a military campaign of more than a few days. On that point, even he must now know that he was wrong. Instead of abandoning the campaign, NATO has intensified it. There are now twice as many aircraft taking part in the bombing campaign as there were at the start. As NATO grows stronger in the theatre, the Serb war machine in Kosovo grows weaker. We have now destroyed in Kosovo alone 70 tanks, 134 personnel carriers and 140 artillery pieces. We have destroyed half the ammunition in storage in Kosovo.

Belgrade's propaganda machine may still refuse to face reality, but the troops in the Yugoslav army know exactly how badly they are being hit. Last week, an entire battalion left the front line and walked through the hills to home. Belgrade has tried to put a brave face on that mass desertion by saying that the commanding officer ordered them to go home and check that their families were well. That does not sound like standard practice for a disciplined unit in the front line. On the contrary, it confirms that demoralisation and indiscipline among the Serb conscripts is now so deep that the army cannot halt mass desertion.

Milosevic, of course, is not moved by the casualties of the Serb conscripts, and he will try to sit out the campaign if he believes that NATO will be the first to give up. We have already shown that we have the superior force. We must now show that we have the greater determination if we are to convince Milosevic that the only exit for him is through accepting our demands.

Milosevic's second gamble was that the bombing campaign would secure his political base by rallying the nation behind him. That worked for a while, but like so many of Milosevic's manoeuvres, it has proved a

short-sighted calculation. In the past week, and again over the weekend, we have learned of protests, demonstrations and near riots against the war in more than half a dozen towns in Serbia.

In Krusevac, several thousand mothers and families stoned the town hall and demanded the return of their sons. In Aleksandrovac, a similar crowd chased the mayor through the streets when he attempted to put the official line. In Cacak, the residents have formed a citizens parliament to discuss their grievances with the regime, and their disagreement with its actions in Kosovo. Addressing that parliament, the mayor said:

"All that is happening is very ugly . . . someone should be held accountable . . . We want those who led us into this adventure to realise they must go."

Much of the grievance that prompts those protests comes from the knowledge that it is the sons of the provincial towns and the countryside who have been called up to do the dirty work, while the sons of the better-connected families in Belgrade are exempt.

However, even in Belgrade, open dissent is now on the increase. Two years ago, there were mass protests in Belgrade after Milosevic refused to recognise the election as mayor of Mr. Djindjic. As a result of threats directly inspired by Milosevic and his wife, Mr. Djindjic has now fled to Montenegro where he has called for an end to Belgrade's repression in Kosovo and for Milosevic to go when the war is over.

Mr. Djindjic's story illustrates the importance of Montenegro as a haven for those who speak out against Milosevic. In about an hour's time, I shall receive President Djukanovic of Montenegro on his visit to Britain. On behalf of all Members of the House, I shall congratulate him on the courage he has shown in opposing Milosevic's ethnic cleansing in Kosovo, and on the generous spirit in which he has kept open the borders of Montenegro to the hundred thousand refugees who have crossed over from Kosovo.

The best way in which we can now support Montenegro and all those people who want to see Milosevic go is to deny him the opportunity, which he desperately wants, to claim victory. The best blow that we can strike for freedom and democracy in Yugoslavia is to show that his confrontation with NATO ends in failure.

Milosevic's third gamble was that he could persuade NATO to accept failure and to back off in view of his programme of sustained atrocities against the Kosovo Albanians. That gamble has spectacularly backfired in his face. The more that the Governments of NATO learn of the brutality and butchery that he has ordered in Kosovo, the more they are determined that such aggression cannot be tolerated and will not go unpunished.

At the weekend, we saw further evidence, if any more were needed, of the barbarity with which Milosevic's forces behave in Kosovo, when more than 500 men staggered over the border, telling of how they had been abused and starved in a Serb prison. One man had been beaten with wooden clubs across his hands until every finger had been broken. He is a tailor. It must be a matter of doubt whether he will ever be able to return to his trade.

This morning, I was joined at our daily press conference by rape counsellors from the camps in Macedonia. The Albanian women who have been humiliated by the Serb troops are reluctant to speak publicly, but they have been speaking privately to rape counsellors. This morning, one of those counsellors—evidently moved by what she had had to hear—described how she had counselled a family of a mother and five daughters, all of whom had been raped.

It may be that Milosevic's thugs thought that they could get away with such brutality because, after all, that is the way in which they have behaved for a decade. The reports of ethnic cleansing, rape of young women and massacre of young men are chillingly familiar from the behaviour of the same Serb forces during the civil war in Bosnia. At that time, it took the international community three years to muster the resolve to launch an air campaign. This time, the Governments of NATO are agreed that Milosevic must be faced down now. If we do not want to see another instalment of the same brutality visited on Montenegro, Sandjak or Vojvodina, we must demonstrate that aggression does not pay by forcing Milosevic to reverse the ethnic cleansing in Kosovo.

Mr. Andrew Tyrie (Chichester): May we conclude that it remains NATO's policy that Milosevic should be arraigned as a war criminal, and that there is no possibility that we will negotiate with him?

Mr. Cook: It has never been NATO's policy that Milosevic should be arraigned as a war criminal. That is a judgment for the International War Crimes Tribunal for which, as members of the United Nations, we all share responsibility. We set up the tribunal as an independent body with an independent prosecutor. I can assure the hon. Gentleman that Britain is sharing with that prosecutor all the information that we have on the atrocities in Kosovo, including some sensitive intelligence that we would not previously have shared on that scale with a court. We are leaving the prosecutor to come to a judgment as to whether an indictment should be brought.

As for dealing with Milosevic, I repeat what I have previously told the House: I shall deal with whoever has effective power in Belgrade to deliver our objectives. There will be no negotiation on those objectives and there will be no compromise on the key objective that the refugees must return in safety under the protection of an international force with a NATO core.

Dr. Norman A. Godman (Greenock and Inverclyde) *rose—*

Mr. Tam Dalyell (Linlithgow) *rose—*

Mr. Cook: I can think of no one better to give way to than my hon. Friend the Member for Greenock and Inverclyde (Dr. Godman).

Dr. Godman: When my right hon. Friend meets the President of Montenegro in 58 minutes, will he be able to outline plainly the role that the European Union will play in the reconstruction of those communities that have been razed by Milosevic and his murderous thugs? Surely the European Union will have to play an important interventionist role, especially where funds are concerned.

Mr. Cook: We are already conducting detailed discussions among our close allies and other members of the Security Council—including Russia—about the structure of the international presence that will follow the

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end of the conflict. It is agreed on all sides that the European Union will be the lead agency in the economic reconstruction of Kosovo and the physical reconstruction of its villages and towns.

We have already given 13 million euros in assistance to Montenegro to help it through a severe budgetary crisis caused by both the presence of the refugees and the loss of much of its trade through Serbia. I will explore with President Djukanovic how a democratic Montenegro, under the leadership that has provided the present policies, can play its part in the new start that we offer to all the countries of the region for an open trading area and a Balkan regeneration plan which will accelerate the integration of those countries into a modern Europe. We also hold out the prospect to the people of Serbia that they can be part of that programme if Belgrade turns its face away from the policies of fascism rooted in the middle of this century.

Mr. Dalyell: What is NATO's assessment of the damage caused so far to the environment by ammonia, benzene, mercury, phosgene and other pollutants as a result of attacks on chemical factories?

Mr. Cook: My hon. Friend will welcome the news that the United Nations Environment Programme today submitted its report on its assessment of the environmental hazards in Serbia and concluded that the environmental damage was minimal. My hon. Friend will also be aware that the United Nations Under-Secretary-General today completes his tour of Yugoslavia, which has included some days spent in Kosovo assessing the humanitarian impact of the Serb forces' activities. I will share with the House his conclusion at his press conference as he left Montenegro. He said:

"One word—it is pretty revolting."

The Under-Secretary-General described town after town that has been reduced to a ghost town—emptied of a population who have fled in terror—and houses that have been burnt and destroyed. The impact of Serb forces on the environment in which the people of Kosovo lived is far greater than anything we have done in Serbia.

At the end of last week, I visited Washington. That visit demonstrated the solidarity of our two countries and our joint resolve to secure the objectives of NATO. Tonight, I set out on a tour of Rome, Bonn and Paris to consult my colleagues in the major European capitals of the alliance. I want to take stock with them on the success of our military campaign and the progress of the diplomatic initiatives. As both the military and the diplomatic tracks gather momentum, it is important that we prepare now to be ready for the day when we can escort the refugees back.

Britain is urging that we get on with those preparations so that we are ready to enter Kosovo as soon as our diplomatic initiatives have secured agreement on our objectives, or when our military campaign has left the Serb forces unable to cling on inside Kosovo. We will be exploring with partners what contribution we can each make to ensure that NATO has a balanced force with a broad base across the alliance, ready to move whenever the time comes for the refugees to go home.

Whether or not it is a member of NATO, every European Union member state is solidly behind our key objectives: the Serb forces must get out of Kosovo, NATO troops must be allowed into Kosovo, and the refugees must be allowed back in safety.

Mr. Bowen Wells (Hertford and Stortford): Is proper provision being made to enable the Kosovo refugees to go home? They will need prefabricated homes in their present location in Albania or Macedonia, which they can pack up and take back to Kosovo to erect in their villages and towns while they rebuild their homes and the surrounding infrastructure. Has funding been made available and have preparations been made for that objective, and will the Foreign Secretary discuss it with all his interlocutors in the next few days?

Mr. Cook: The hon. Gentleman raises a serious issue, and speaks from a great depth of knowledge and interest in the subject. We are currently exploring with humanitarian agencies and our allies the important pre-positioning, within the region, of the building materials that we shall need to assist the refugees to get through the winter. Whether the refugees spend that time in Kosovo or elsewhere, building materials will be relevant to the winterisation programme. I hope that with the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, we will be able to proceed with that prudent contingency for winter. We have consistently demanded that when the refugees return, they should be accompanied by free, unhindered entry of all the relevant humanitarian agencies.

Mr. Douglas Hogg (Sleaford and North Hykeham): The right hon. Gentleman referred to the entry of NATO forces into Kosovo when the Serb forces are, in his words, unable to cling on. To what extent does he contemplate using or involving forces from outside NATO, particularly from countries belonging to the Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe, and to what extent have there been talks with OSCE countries with a view to deploying their troops, with NATO troops, into Kosovo?

Mr. Cook: There have been discussions with a number of countries, inside and outside the OSCE, that might be willing to make a contribution, and some Islamic nations would want to participate in our force to pacify Kosovo and guarantee the ceasefire. NATO has a number of partners for peace that have also expressed an interest in taking part and, in the past few weeks, we have had direct discussions with Russia.

We have always stressed that to be credible and effective, that international military presence must have a NATO core with a NATO command structure, but we have also made it plain that it will not be an exclusively NATO show. On the contrary, we would welcome other partners, who are anxious to contribute to Kosovo's reconstruction, working with us to demonstrate the broad range of international opinion that condemns the atrocities in Kosovo.

I am confident that when we agree the communique of the Cologne summit, it will affirm our joint resolve to complete the task and deliver on those key objectives without compromise. The Cologne summit will, however, also address a wide-ranging agenda. The key issues before

the summit reflect this Government's priorities for a Europe of reform, a Europe of the people and a Europe of strength in the world.

Let me start with the reform of Europe. The Government recognise that Britain's future lies in Europe. We believe that our people will be more prosperous if we deepen our trade and ties with Europe, and that their Government will have more, not less, influence around the world if we act as one with our partners. The fact that we are for Europe does not, however, prevent us from arguing for reform of Europe. On the contrary, the respect that the Government have gained in every capital of the European Union achieves far more than the Conservative party ever secured when it was in government. That respect and credibility gives us a strength when we argue for reform which the previous Government never had.

At Cologne, Romano Prodi will report on his plans for modernising the Commission. We very much welcome his commitment to the guiding principles of transparency, accountability and efficiency, and his pledge to the European Parliament that he wants a culture in the Commission that has "zero tolerance of corruption". *[Interruption.]* I do not know why Opposition Members should find anything funny in zero tolerance of corruption. We should surely try to build a consensus in the House on that. I assure hon. Members that I shall say more contentious things later, but on that I had looked for bilateral support.

We shall judge the proposals that Mr. Prodi submits at Cologne by whether they address many of the endemic weaknesses of Commission practice. Following the dramatic report of the committee of wise men, we circulated among all our partners the priorities that we believed must be addressed: recruitment should be objective and fair; promotion should be on merit, not on patronage; contracts should be awarded by procedures that are transparent and open; and the inspection of fraud should be independent and robust.

Mr. Tim Loughton (East Worthing and Shoreham): Does the Foreign Secretary think that his Government gained respect in the capitals of Europe when his Members of the European Parliament voted to keep a corrupt Commission in power for yet more months, which has now been forced to resign?

Mr. Cook: The European Parliament took no such decision. The treaty sets out that the Commission will remain in power until a new Commission is appointed. The European Council moved fast to appoint a new President, who is actively constructing the new Commission. As soon as that Commission is in place, the treaty provisions will take effect and the previous Commission will leave. The European Parliament did not vote to keep the Commissioners in office, nor did the European Parliament have the power to vote them out of office.

Mr. Michael Connarty (Falkirk, East): To return to the point about the independence of fraud investigations, would it not be better for the new fraud investigating organisation to be outwith the Commission, so that it does not fall into the same trap as the previous organisation, which became part of the culture of the Commission?

Mr. Cook: We are clear that there must be changes in the structure so that the investigation of fraud is more independent. Fraud is theft from the taxpayers of Europe. The citizens of Europe are entitled to expect their funds to be spent with the same care and the same accountability as they demand from their national Government. At Cologne, we will be demanding that the management of the Commission matches up to the best standards in public administration.

Mr. Andrew Lansley (South Cambridgeshire): I am not sure that I understood the Foreign Secretary's reply to his hon. Friend the Member for Falkirk, East (Mr. Connarty). Surely ECOFIN is today agreeing an anti-fraud system that is within the Commission, not independent of the Commission. Is it not necessary that the anti-fraud activity be outside the Commission and independent of the Commission?

Mr. Cook: I fear that the hon. Gentleman has misunderstood what was approved at ECOFIN. It was agreed that the new fraud investigation should be independent of the Commission, but should be within the European institutions. That reflects a judgment that if it were entirely outside, it would not get the access that it requires to be an effective invigilator. The development that we secured at ECOFIN today gives much greater independence and strength to the fraud investigator than ever occurred during the 18 years in which hon. Gentlemen were bleating about fraud.

Cologne will mark another step towards the creation of a people's Europe. We believe that if the European Union is to belong to the people, it must be driven by their priorities. First among their priorities is the opportunity of a job, or the security of the job that they hold. At Cologne, the German presidency will submit its proposals for an employment pact. We will want to ensure that the final text promotes economic reform and reflects the priorities of this Government in training the long-term and young unemployed.

We also welcome the initiative by the presidency in proposing a European charter of rights. In our view, that should not attempt to break new ground, but should consolidate in one place the many rights and freedoms that are already guaranteed in European legislation.

Mr. William Cash (Stone): Does the Foreign Secretary agree with the German Foreign Minister, Mr. Joschka Fischer, when he said that the decisive task of our time in relation to Europe is the creation of a legal entity in international law? Does he accept that that would effectively be a European constitution? Would he go along with the idea, or will he dismiss it now, in the House?

Mr. Cook: I have a feeling that I dismissed the idea three or four months ago, when the hon. Gentleman last put it to me. For the record, we are not proposing a constitution of Europe. We are proposing that a charter of rights should codify in a single place the rights that already exist in European legislation.

I say to the hon. Gentleman that we should not be afraid of that concept. We have a national interest in insisting that membership of the European Union should underpin freedoms and rights throughout every member state. That is why we broadly welcome that European charter of

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rights, which will strengthen the identity of the European Union as an area of freedom, security, justice and equal rights. I am sure that he also would wish to achieve that.

Mr. Nicholas Soames (Mid-Sussex): Will the Foreign Secretary give way?

Mr. Cook: I will certainly give way to the hon. Gentleman, but then I must, if I may, make some progress.

Mr. Soames: I am sorry to ask the Foreign Secretary to give way after he has done so, so often. If the employment pact paper does not reflect the steps taken by his Government, what will he then do?

Mr. Cook: I can assure the hon. Gentleman that we are already in dialogue with the German presidency on the text. I have seen a draft and can assure him that even he—and, even more so, some of his colleagues—will find it hard to regard it as threatening. It does not pose a major challenge to us, and it builds on work that has been done over the past two years in the European Councils. For example, the work that was done at Luxembourg secured employment guidelines which very much reflect the Government's priority of training for the long-term and young unemployed.

The text builds also on the decision taken at Cardiff that we should promote economic reform and require national reports on progress in the liberalisation of product and labour markets. Those reports are now coming in and will be summarised for us by the Commission when we meet at Cologne. I can assure the hon. Gentleman that the work, which is progressive and cumulative, and which builds on those previous achievements, will reflect our priorities.

Mr. Stephen Dorrell (Charnwood): Will the Foreign Secretary give way?

Mr. Cook: I will, but then, if I may, I must finish my speech. I appreciate that many of the Members who are intervening will wish to make speeches themselves.

Mr. Dorrell: I am grateful to the Foreign Secretary for giving way. I want to follow up the point on which my hon. Friend the Member for Mid-Sussex (Mr. Soames) was probing. The Foreign Secretary said that he has seen a draft of the pact and thinks that it is satisfactory. Can he confirm that it includes, as was promised in the European socialist manifesto,

"agreed reductions in working time negotiated between the social partners"?

Is that inside the pact or not?

Mr. Cook: The pact proposes greater dialogue between the social partners, but the particular passage chosen by the right hon. Gentleman—I remember very well the discussions on it—leaves it to the social partners within nations to decide for themselves. The terms in which it is drafted make it plain that the measure will not be imposed by the national Government, far less by the national Governments of Europe meeting in the Council of Ministers.

To turn to the last of the three areas in which Cologne will mark a step towards our objectives for Europe, there will be further progress towards achieving strength in the world for the European Union. We expect that the Cologne summit will endorse the Franco-British initiative, which we launched at St. Malo, for an enhanced capacity for the European Union to take decisions on security in support of our common foreign policy.

At Washington, in the NATO summit, Britain was instrumental in brokering a deal that will give Europe access to the common assets of NATO when we undertake military commitments in which the whole of the alliance is not engaged. At Cologne, we must make sure that Europe has the capability to take responsible decisions on security and the military capacity to carry out those decisions.

Mr. Cash: Majority voting.

Mr. Cook: No, that will be done by consensus.

I stress that that project is not in any way aimed at providing a substitute for NATO. The warm support at Washington from the United States for our initiative shows that we have been successful in designing proposals that will not decouple Europe from NATO, will not duplicate the functions of NATO and will not discriminate against members of NATO who are not members of the European Union. NATO will be stronger, not weaker, if we can make its European pillar more cohesive and more effective.

In sum, we will be working to achieve at Cologne real progress towards a Europe that is reformed, that responds to the priorities of its people and that is capable of exercising real strength on their behalf. We will be working to make a success of the summit and to show that Europe works. That provides quite a contrast with the Conservative party which, when in power, went to European summits to prove that Europe could not work. Those memories of glorious isolation still linger in the Opposition—or, at least, in some quarters of the Opposition; not in all. I recognise that some Opposition Members are isolated in their own party in resisting isolation within Europe.

The right hon. and learned Member for Folkestone and Hythe (Mr. Howard) has criticised me for signing up to a European manifesto for next month's European elections. In case he thinks we are worried about that, let me tell him that it is precisely because we have a score of sister parties throughout Europe—most of them in government—that we are able to secure a better deal for Britain. It is a sign of strength, not weakness, that we are able to stand on the same manifesto, with the same commitments, as the governing parties of most of Europe.

Let me remind the right hon. and learned Gentleman that his party also has sister parties, such as the European People's party, and that they have a common manifesto. The European People's party manifesto opens with the ringing promise:

"We will not try to win your vote by saying different things in different places. We will present the same ideas to everyone everywhere."

Mr. Michael Howard (Folkestone and Hythe): We have not signed up to it.

Mr. Cook: Let me tell the right hon. and learned Gentleman, if he does not already know, that five of his

Tory MEPs are on the executive of the European People's party, and that one of them presided over the working group that produced the home affairs section of the manifesto. Those who are standing for the Tory party in the election have signed up to it.

Miss Anne McIntosh (Vale of York): Will the Foreign Secretary give way?

Mr. Cook: I will later.

If the right hon. and learned Gentleman has studied the manifesto, I understand why he is anxious to say that the Tories have not signed up to it. In the very first section, we find a commitment to

"the harmonisation of European legislation in asylum and immigration, with European criteria at all European borders."

We also find that the European People's party considers that

"the single currency is the foundation-stone of what we intend to be a new era."

The manifesto says:

"A federal Europe is now more than ever a necessary objective."

Mr. Howard: I am awfully sorry to spoil the right hon. Gentleman's fun, but can he produce a scintilla of evidence that the Conservative party has signed up to that document? We are not members of the European People's party; we are not bound by the document; we have not signed up to it; and we have made it absolutely clear that we disagree with it. We are candidates for the elections, but we are standing on the manifesto of the British Conservative party.

Mr. Cook: What the right hon. and learned Gentleman says will come as news to many of his Tory MEPs. Two of the vice-presidents of the European People's party are Tory MEPs. The treasurer is a Tory MEP. The person who presided over the group that produced the section on home affairs that I just quoted is a Tory MEP, Mr. Perry. If the right hon. and learned Gentleman is saying that the Conservatives cannot agree with those policies—

Mr. Michael Jack (Fylde): On a point of order, Mr. Deputy Speaker. I understood that it was the practice of speakers to address their remarks through the Chair. I observe that the Foreign Secretary has spent a great deal of time looking in the opposite direction. Is he in order?

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Sir Alan Haselhurst): The point raised by the right hon. Gentleman is obvious to all right hon. and hon. Members, but I do not think that it is worth an interruption of the debate.

Mr. Cook: Thank you, Mr. Deputy Speaker. I am happy to turn around if it assists the Chair.

Miss McIntosh: Will the Foreign Secretary give way?

Mr. Cook: No.

The right hon. and learned Member for Folkestone and Hythe is right to say that the Conservatives have their own manifesto. It is a manifesto dripping with commitments to oppose, to fight, and to opt out of what other member states want to do. The Tory manifesto was plainly written by people who regard Brussels as a dangerous beast that must be wrestled to the ground.

In their hearts, the Tories are afraid of Europe. *[Interruption.]* They are. Their manifesto makes it clear that they think that half of what Europe wants to do now is a mistake, and should be fought. As they have no allies—and the right hon. and learned Gentleman has been anxious to disown any that they might have—it is a fight that they are doomed to lose; but, in the meantime, they will guarantee that no other member state listens with patience to what they have to say.

By contrast, the Government have shown that constructive engagement in Europe can produce a better deal for Britain. By building alliances, we have secured an agreement to end the beef ban, which the Conservative party failed to shift by a strategy of disruption. We have won a bigger increase than any other member state in the number of regions eligible for objective 1 status from the structural funds. We have secured a clear legal base, for the first time, for Britain to retain border controls. We have cut the food bill of the average British family of four by £65 a year. We have brought the benefits of the social chapter and the working time directive to every British employee.

Mr. Loughton: That is fantasy island.

Mr. Cook: The hon. Gentleman may say that it is fantasy, but it is no fantasy to the 2.5 million British workers who now enjoy paid annual leave for the first time. If the hon. Gentleman and his Front-Bench colleagues still think that we are wrong and that the directive is Brussels red tape, perhaps before polling day they would make it clear to those 2.5 million voters and their families that the Conservatives believe that the decision was wrong.

The Government see Europe as an opportunity to make our people more prosperous, our freedoms more secure and our voice carry further around the world. We see a strong and healthy Europe not as a threat, but as an asset to Britain. That is why we go to Cologne with more respect from our partners than the Conservative party ever had, and with more trust from the British people that we can shape the Europe of the future that will serve them.

5.6 pm

Mr. Michael Howard (Folkestone and Hythe): The Cologne Council takes place at a vital time for the European Union. There are many decisions to be taken, which will prove crucial in determining Europe's future development. One subject is more pressing than any of the others: it is the need to make decisions in the next few days about the course of the conflict over Kosovo.

We share the horror expressed by the Foreign Secretary at the atrocities committed by the Milosevic regime. All the commentators now seem to agree that if the refugees are to return home in any number before the onset of winter, a decision will have to be taken very soon about the deployment of many more allied ground troops in the region. Indeed, that is no longer denied by the Government.

As I have said before, the language used by the Government to describe the circumstances in which ground troops should be committed has repeatedly

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changed. First, it was only after a peace agreement had been signed, then it was in a permissive environment, then the phrase used was "semi-permissive", and in the past few days it has been "non-permissive." As I have also said, those changes may be justified, but they must be explained. The justification needs to be set out, not in a way that gives any advantage to Milosevic, but so as to present the Government's strategic thinking to the nation and to the House.

If that were done, I suspect that both the nation and the House would endorse that action. At the moment, Parliament is being asked to present the Prime Minister with a blank cheque. That is not the role of the House, and it is not the way in which we carry out our responsibilities in a parliamentary democracy. In the absence of a convincing explanation, we shall continue to scrutinise, question and, when necessary, to criticise the Government's conduct.

We wish the Foreign Secretary well in his visit to Rome, Bonn and Paris. We have supported NATO's objectives from the start. As the purpose of his visits will be to further those objectives, he carries with him our support and our good wishes for the success of the discussions in those capital cities in which he will no doubt participate.

Mr. Dalyell: How would ground troops be put in, given that access through the port of Thessaloniki will almost certainly be denied by the Greeks—if not by the Greek Government, certainly by the Greek workers? Piraeus is not available, as the mayor of Athens has said that not a single dock worker will lift a finger. They can hardly go through Hungary with 350,000 ethnic Hungarians. The Macedonians, when they were on the Inter-Parliamentary Union visit, made it abundantly clear that they did not want their country to be used as a springboard. To go through Albania with 6,000 ft mountains and roads that peter out would be a major problem. How would ground troops be supplied once they were there, if they got there?

Mr. Howard: Those are cogent questions. The hon. Gentleman must direct them at the Foreign Secretary. I have not taken part in any discussions or negotiations with the Greek Government, the Hungarian Government or any of the other Governments in the region. Certainly, as part of the convincing explanation that I seek, the reasonable points that have been raised by the hon. Gentleman will have to be answered. It is, of course, for the Foreign Secretary to answer them.

I have one question on Kosovo for the Foreign Secretary. I hope that he now, or the Minister of State, Foreign and Commonwealth Office in her winding-up speech, will assure the House that he will continue to argue that any military presence in Kosovo, whenever it enters that tragic and devastated land, will be NATO led.

Kosovo is the most urgent question on the agenda at Cologne, but it is by no means the only one. Other issues are vital, too. The German presidency has in many respects been a defining period. The arrival of the single currency in January was a sign of things to come. As the president of the European central bank said at the time, it meant that monetary policy, which had been, in his words,

"an essential part of national sovereignty",

would in future be

"decided by a truly European institution".

As a result, it seemed that Europe's leaders felt able to be even more explicit about their intentions. Germany's Minister for Europe, for example, made his position clear:

"Normally a single currency is the final step in a process of political integration. This time the single currency isn't the final step but the beginning. Inevitably it will happen".

Germany's Foreign Minister said:

"Political union, including new member states, must be the lodestar from now on—it is the logical follow-on from economic and monetary union."

He said that turning the European Union into an entity under international law, with a common constitution, is

"the decisive task of our time."

Then along came Mr. Prodi, who said:

"Europe needs a strong Government"

and that the Commission "will be the Government." He went on to say that, in due course, just as a European single currency exists, so there should be a single European army.

Therefore, the agenda of the integrationists on the continent of Europe is clear: one currency, one tax policy, one employment policy, one legal area, one army—what else is needed to create a single European state? Why do the integrationists here deny it? Why, alone in Europe, do they pretend that they do not subscribe to that vision?

Why did the Foreign Secretary say, flying in the face of all the facts, in his interview with the *New Statesman* last August, that

"Maastricht was the high water mark of integration"?

Did he not realise that the ground would be cut from under him within months by the Downing street spokesman who told *The Daily Telegraph* on 26 March:

"Integration is part of our mantra . . . The Prime Minister is busy integrating now."

Did the Foreign Secretary not foresee that, within weeks of that interview, he would be writing to me listing the areas that would remain the preserve of national Governments as to how we run our education and health systems, the welfare state, personal taxes and matters affecting our culture and identity? There was no mention of corporate taxation or any taxation other than personal taxation; no mention of asylum or immigration. They are clearly not matters that, in the Foreign Secretary's view, should remain the preserve of national Government.

In that letter to me, the Foreign Secretary explicitly identified defence as a suitable area for integration. Very few people witnessing the European contribution to the crisis in Kosovo would deny that there is much scope for closer co-operation among the European members of NATO in relation to defence. But co-operation is not the same as integration, and integration outside the framework of NATO, as is explicitly envisaged in the St. Malo agreement that was signed by the Prime Minister at the end of last year, could do great damage to the alliance between Europe and America in the form of NATO, which still remains critical to the future peace and prosperity of the world.

We have still to receive answers from the Government to the most basic questions on the future of European defence as they see it.

Mr. John Smith (Vale of Glamorgan): Can we assume from what the right hon. and learned Gentleman says that he rules out the possibility of a European defence architecture even within NATO?

Mr. Howard: I have no idea what the hon. Gentleman means by the phrase "European defence architecture". As I have said, I am in favour of closer European co-operation on defence matters within NATO; that seems to make total sense. The problem up to now for European members of NATO in relation to defence matters has been not the lack of any institution or architecture, but the lack of agreement. Far too often, the European members of NATO have disagreed among themselves on what they should do.

We have still to receive answers to some basic questions. What is to be the position of the countries that are members of NATO but not of the European Union—Norway, Iceland and Turkey, and the new entrants—Poland, Hungary and the Czech Republic? What is to be the position of the members of the European Union who are neutral but are not members of NATO—Austria, Sweden and Ireland? As a senior civil servant told *The Guardian* on 26 October:

"It is refreshing but a bit unnerving for us to have a Prime Minister who is prepared to launch a major policy debate without knowing where it is going to end up."

The leader of the European socialist party, at any rate, is under no illusions about where it will end up. On 12 January, Pauline Green said:

"We believe in the extension of majority voting on everything except changes to the Treaty, the membership of new countries in the European Union and taxation issues."

So there we have it: a single European army committed to action—or, perhaps more likely, prevented from action—by majority voting. That is the socialist prescription for European defence, and it is a prescription that the Opposition utterly reject.

Defence is by no means the only matter on which the Government are working towards further integration. If the Governments of Europe were serious about taking action to reduce the number of people without jobs in Europe—more than 16 million of them—they would be spending their time in Cologne discussing how to cut down regulations and red tape. Instead, they will be discussing the so-called employment pact—which should be renamed the "unemployment pact", as it contains more of the policies that created Europe's tragic unemployment levels initially.

As my right hon. Friend the Member for Charnwood (Mr. Dorrell) has just pointed out, the manifesto on which the Labour party will be fighting the elections to the European Parliament talks about negotiating with the so-called social partners—union leaders and business organisations—at a European level. Now just imagine the uproar there would be if the Government legislated to make agreements between the Trades Union Congress and the Confederation of British Industry binding on all British firms. Everyone would realise that such an arrangement is far worse even than the mess that we got into under a Labour Government in the 1970s. Yet, these proposals are even worse than that.

The proposals would provide that agreements between trade unions and employers organisations at European level are binding on British firms—and we know the type of thing that they have in mind. Labour's manifesto for the European elections specifically talks about the further restrictions on working time that it wants to see. We know that the Commission wants to extend the working time directive to the transport industry, as if that directive had not created enough havoc already.

We know that the Commission is going ahead with its proposals on works councils—proposals that the Government themselves oppose, but which they are now powerless to prevent because they signed up to the social chapter and the extension of qualified majority voting that it provides. We also know that the German Minister for Europe has called for a co-ordinated wages policy.

Two weeks ago, the Economic and Finance Council agreed to make

"fiscal and monetary policy as well as wage developments mutually supportive."

Perhaps the Minister will tell the House how that is to be achieved without inhibiting the private sector's ability to determine the salaries that its employees are paid.

Mr. Hogg: My right hon. and learned Friend has identified a major threat to Britain's industrial future. However, is he not notably concerned about another aspect of it—that the European Court will itself be able to interpret the agreements? Does not its track record suggest that it will drive forward the agreements to encompass matters that were not contemplated even by those who made them?

Mr. Howard: My right hon. and learned Friend is entirely right. We could point to numerous examples of that.

The Labour party claims that at long last it has learned the lessons of the disastrous prices and incomes policies for which it was responsible in the past, but it now proposes to introduce them at a European level.

There is also the matter of tax harmonisation. At Cologne, Europe's leaders should be welcoming the effect of tax competition in creating an incentive for European countries to get their taxes down. Instead, we shall see more tax harmonisation to which yet again Labour is committed in its manifesto. It is perhaps hardly surprising that the Government should be prepared to give up their veto on taxes; they are not prepared to exercise the veto, even when they have got it. We still have no assurance that the Government will exercise their veto on the withholding tax which will do so much damage and destroy so many jobs in the most successful sector of the British economy. Indeed, so much importance do the Government attach to this measure; so high does it come on its list of priorities, that the Deputy Prime Minister had clearly never even heard of it until he was memorably questioned about it by my hon. Friend the Member for West Worcestershire (Sir M. Spicer) just a few weeks ago.

This morning, in another example of the Government's well-honed spinning tactics, we were told that the withholding tax had been toned down—not withdrawn, but toned down—so presumably the damage that it will do to British jobs and British commercial success will also be toned down, but not withdrawn. That simply will not do. The withholding tax should be vetoed at

[Mr. Howard]

ECOFIN today. Anything less would be an abdication of the Government's responsibility to those whose interests they are charged to defend. However, the withholding tax is by no means the only tax harmonisation measure that we face. So sensitive are the Government about the extent of the proposals that one has to go to a Dutch Government website to find out what they are about—on the very day that the Government published their draft Bill on freedom of information.

Mr. Loughton: My right hon. and learned Friend might be interested to know that a press agency has just reported that the Chancellor has given in on the withholding tax. He has not used his veto, so the country will have to accept it subject to certain clauses. Would my right hon. and learned Friend like to comment on that?

Mr. Howard: Well, I did not know that. It is extremely bad news for jobs in this country and for what is perhaps the most successful part of the British economy. It is indeed a black day. If it is true, the Government should make a statement to the House explaining why they have surrendered in this fashion.

Mr. Jack: I very much support my right hon. and learned Friend in calling for a statement, particularly bearing in mind the assurances that the Prime Minister gave me in answer to an oral question in the House saying that the veto would be used to prevent the withholding tax from being imposed on the United Kingdom.

Mr. Howard: My right hon. Friend will be well aware that the Chancellor has repeatedly refused to repeat the assurance that the Prime Minister gave him. As he rightly pointed out, that is a serious matter.

Labour MEPs have already voted for the British veto to be abandoned "as a general rule" in much of the tax field, making Britain powerless to resist higher European tax rates.

There it is—in a nutshell. More red tape, higher taxes—the very measures that have crippled Europe's ability to compete with the rest of the world are to be reinforced and extended.

The proposals continue to spew out of a Commission that should not still be there. So discredited a body has it become that in March the Commissioners were obliged to resign. However, in the topsy-turvy world of the European Commission, resigning means staying in office, continuing to draw salaries and continuing to take decisions—125 decisions affecting the lives of 300 million people across Europe since March—and pretending that nothing has happened.

The responsibility for this lamentable state of affairs rests fairly and squarely with the Council of Ministers, with the Governments of Europe. They should have immediately declared their readiness to appoint new Commissioners to make the resignations effective and it is not too late for them to do it at Cologne.

The Governments of Europe should also be pressing for radical reform. My right hon. Friend the Leader of the Opposition has proposed a comprehensive agenda for reform, including the establishment of a truly independent fraud office outside, not inside, the Commission. The Foreign Secretary was unconvincing in dodging the question from the hon. Member for Falkirk, East (Mr. Connarty) on that simple point.

How can we expect serious reform from Ministers from a party whose leader in the European Parliament—Pauline Green, the leader of the European socialists—was singled out for criticism by Paul van Buitenen, the whistleblowing official suspended from his post by the Commission? How can we expect reform from a party whose Members of the European Parliament have refused to censure or dismiss a single Commissioner throughout the crisis? Labour MEPs put down a motion of censure on the Commission in the European Parliament, then withdrew it as soon as it looked as though it was going to be passed. The party's sole aim has been to protect its own, to save its face and to whitewash fraud.

The fundamental lesson arising from Europe's recent crisis is that Europe has been doing too much and doing it badly. At Cologne, Europe's leaders should discuss how the European Union could do less, but do it better, not least so that significant reductions can be made in the size of the European budget. They should also discuss enlargement. The Foreign Secretary's memorandum to the Foreign Affairs Committee last week did not mention enlargement, except in the context of qualified majority voting. We have consistently called for enlargement to be a priority for the EU. This is an historic opportunity to advance the principles for which Europe should stand: free trade, free markets, deregulation and co-operation. The timetable has been delayed as a result of Europe's failure to recognise the need to change itself, to make its procedures more flexible and to cut costs.

Perhaps when she winds up the Minister will make it clear whether she agrees with our proposal, made as part of our drive to increase flexibility in Europe, to give applicant countries the opportunity of a partial derogation from the acquis communautaire. Will she also clarify the effect that recent events in the Balkans will have on the accession timetable for countries such as Bulgaria and Romania, which are not included in the first wave?

We can tell that an election is imminent, because the Prime Minister has let his hitherto latent Euro-scepticism become known to the tabloids. Even for a Government driven by spin doctors, the tactic of repeatedly saying one thing while doing another must be nearing the end of its useful life. We have seen it all before. The House and the country should be fully aware of which Prime Minister will be travelling to Cologne. It will not be the Prime Minister who assured readers of *The Sun* just before the general election of his love for the pound, but the one who, shortly afterwards, committed his Government to abolishing the pound at the earliest opportunity. It will not be the Prime Minister who told British business men that Europe needed to deregulate, but the Prime Minister who then signed up to a European socialist manifesto calling for more regulation. It will not be the Prime Minister who, simply because there is an election coming, pretends that he does not want to bounce Britain into the euro, but the Prime Minister who travels to Aachen to receive a prize for promoting European integration, lamenting the attitude of this nation. We have got used to the Prime Minister and his Government saying one thing in Britain and doing another in Europe. It will not work any more.

At Cologne, Britain needs a Government who will put the case for a more flexible and more outward-looking Europe that deregulates more and interferes less—

in short, a Europe in line with the mainstream views of the British people. That would be a positive vision for the future of Europe. It is the vision held by the Conservative party. The crucial difference between the Government and the Opposition is that the Labour party cannot grasp the fact that it is possible to be constructive about Europe and in Europe without conceding vital British interests. When the Conservative party co-operates with our sister parties in Europe, we do so without signing up to manifestos with which we disagree and without abandoning all vestige of principle. When we publish a joint statement with our centre-right colleagues we do so as well as, not instead of, giving firm pledges to the British people. Unlike Labour's, Conservative policies are made in Britain for Britain.

This is the first British election of any kind during which a major political party has not fought the election on a British manifesto. Instead, the Labour party has handed out the manifesto of the Party of European Socialists. The name Labour party is nowhere to be found in that document. Alas, that is the party that will represent Britain in Cologne. When it travels to the continent, it does so not to work for British interests, but to receive its instructions.

I have one question, which I hope that the Minister of State will answer when she winds up. Given that the manifesto of the Party of European Socialists is the platform on which her party is standing, would not it be more honest for their candidates to describe themselves on the ballot paper as representing the Party of European Socialists? After all, that is what they are asking people to vote for on 10 June.

Mr. Mike Gapes (Ilford, South): Will the right hon. and learned Gentleman confirm that the xenophobic policy that he is now putting forward, and on which his party fought the general election, led to a humiliating electoral defeat for the Conservative party? Is he looking forward to repeating that on 10 June?

Mr. Howard: I am certainly looking forward to the results on 10 June and I suggest that the hon. Gentleman holds his fire until we have seen them.

The Government's approach to the vital questions facing Europe is a million miles away from the mainstream views of the British public. To coin a phrase, it is time for a change in Europe. That change will never come from Labour, and the Liberal Democrats have given up all pretence of defending Britain's interests. Only the Conservatives believe that Britain should be in Europe, not run by Europe. Only the Conservatives will work for the kind of Europe that the British people want.

Dr. Godman: The right hon. and learned Gentleman does not even speak as a representative of a British party.

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Sir Alan Haselhurst): Order. The hon. Gentleman should not interrupt the debate from a sedentary position.

5.32 pm

Ms Rosie Winterton (Doncaster, Central): I am grateful for the opportunity to speak in this debate, because I wish to address what my right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary called the people's Europe and the role that the European Union has played in economic regeneration and in creating jobs, especially in the area that I represent. It may be helpful to give some background information about my constituency and South Yorkshire.

Some 30 years ago, the South Yorkshire economy was thriving and the heavy industries of steel and coal were buoyant. Tool and railway engineering companies were large employers and unemployment was well below the national average, while male wages were well above. Indeed, they were among the highest in the country. However, over the past 30 years those traditional industries have collapsed.

In 1984, South Yorkshire had 29 working collieries, which employed more than 30,000 people. In 1998, there were only three collieries, which employed 820 people. That is the scale of the reduction. Between 1977 and 1995, the number of industrial jobs fell by 60 per cent and more than 177,000 jobs were lost. It is true that some 46,500 jobs were created in service industries, but overall the total work force was reduced by a quarter. A total of 132,000 jobs were lost.

In 1997, unemployment in South Yorkshire was 10 per cent., compared with a national average of 7.1 per cent. The effect on local communities is enormous. Many people are surprised that this once-thriving area now qualifies for objective 1 status, but it does: the effect of unemployment has been devastating.

I have a letter from Nigel Pattinson, the head teacher of Armthorpe school in my constituency. The school recently made a promotional video to highlight the school's successes and the achievements of its pupils. It was shown to sixth formers, and Mr. Pattinson writes that, afterwards, one of them said:

"We're only kids from a pit village, you know. You seem to expect us to do better than we're meant to."

The head teacher adds:

"I can't tell you what I feel about this . . . and how damaging it is to these youngsters in reaching their potential."

That shows the scale of the devastation suffered by such communities. However, membership of the European Union has allowed South Yorkshire to access funds and establish projects that try to tackle the real problems created by mass unemployment and reverse the climate of despair that goes hand in hand with it.

Yet much of what has been achieved has been accomplished despite the opposition of the previous Conservative Administration. They refused to introduce any special domestic programmes to help coal mining regions during the main pit closure period after 1984. Europe, on the other hand, listened to our problems and set up the RECHAR programme in 1989. However, even after that programme was established, the Tories tried to prevent the benefits that it brought from reaching mining areas by trying to claw back, from local authorities, the funding that was made available.

The European Commission, lead by Commissioner Bruce Millan, backed the mining areas against the Tory Government, and threatened to block all EU spending unless the Government changed the rules. Eventually, the Tory Government had to back down and European funding became genuinely additional.

However, making the European Union real to people is a big task. We need to make them understand what European funding has done towards meeting their needs.

[Ms Rosie Winterton]

People in South Yorkshire want to know what Europe is doing for them in terms of providing jobs, because that is what they are interested in. I shall give some specific examples of how European funding has directly benefited people in my area.

Between them, the Lakeside development project in central Doncaster and the Junction 4 employment project in Armthorpe in Doncaster have received almost £7 million from the European regional development fund. They are expected to generate more than 8,500 jobs. Local companies have benefited from the Doncaster technology centre, and more than £200,000 in European funding has been received. Companies such as Noel Village (Steel Founder) are accessing, through the export challenge programme, western European countries for export markets. Young people are being trained through a foyer scheme that received more than £0.5 million in funding from Europe.

Crime is being reduced through a CCTV scheme in the town centre, for which £200,000 has been received from Europe. The Doncaster College for the Deaf, a great project, received £93,000 to support residential students and promote interviewing, teamwork and personal skills, thus helping people with disabilities to get into work and live independently. In Armthorpe, European funding helped to set up a community centre, providing a focus for a community that had been devastated by pit closures. Since 1991, Doncaster alone has received £38 million in European structural funds.

Looking towards the future, we have the prospect of funding from the objective 1 programme. Approximately £90 million a year will be available over six years. It is vital that funding is used to meet the needs of local people. My right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary referred to a people's Europe, driven by people and responsive to their needs. People set the priorities, and consultation must be thorough and systematic.

I can recommend a consultation method used in Armthorpe. Instead of simply publishing a questionnaire in the local paper and hoping that people would fill it in, Armthorpe community enterprise, locally known as ACE, joined with Armthorpe school to involve pupils in saying what would improve their job prospects and the quality of life in the community. That resulted in much greater participation than ever before, creating a real sense of involvement in the use of vital European funds among local people, particularly the young.

The results of the consultation will be published soon, and I invite my right hon. Friends the Foreign Secretary and the Minister of State to come to Armthorpe to see the results. They would be able to see what happens in practice when we go down to a lower level to involve local people.

Mr. Denis MacShane (Rotherham): They could see the great brass bands, too.

Ms Winterton: And the great brass bands.

Mr. Robin Cook: They could go on a race day.

Ms Winterton: Indeed; the attractions are mounting by the minute.

Matched funding is vital to the success of the objective 1 programme.

Miss McIntosh: The hon. Lady is giving us a picturesque overview, and she will be aware that North Yorkshire is not a million miles from South Yorkshire. Some of my constituents have benefited substantially from EU funds in the past, particularly 5b funds and the Konver programme. The farming community is in a time of crisis. I hope that the hon. Lady will also plead the case for North Yorkshire with her Front-Bench colleagues so that the whole of Yorkshire can be happy.

Ms Winterton: The hon. Lady is well capable of pleading her own case, but lifting the beef ban is one thing that will make people happier.

The Government, in contrast to the previous Administration, are already preparing so that areas such as South Yorkshire will be able to receive the full benefit of objective 1 funding. With matched funding, the establishment of the coalfields enterprise fund and the coalfields regeneration trust has shown the Government's willingness to ensure that we can use the maximum available resources from objective 1 funding, and assurances have been given about, for example, the single regeneration budget.

Membership of the EU has brought many benefits to the area that I represent. The Government are showing how a positive attitude to Europe, leadership and a willingness to encourage participation in all areas can make a real difference to people's lives. As Linda McAvan, the Member of the European Parliament for my area, said recently, European Union funding means that our coalfields are turning the corner and much-needed new jobs are coming to our area and improving our communities. That is the way in which we can increase people's confidence and self-esteem.

I hope that we will no longer have a situation in which young people in the areas to which I referred say, "We're just from a pit village. Don't expect much from us." The Government are showing how we can change that view and the European Union is helping us to do it.

5.45 pm

Mr. David Heath (Somerton and Frome): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Doncaster, Central (Ms Winterton), who gave us a charming view of the local perspective of Europe in her constituency. As an inveterate supporter of Somerset county cricket club, hon. Members may imagine my dismay at hearing Yorkshire people falling out among themselves as to their objectives.

This is a useful and important opportunity to air concerns before the European Council. I recall the similar debate before the Vienna Council six months ago, when some of the perspectives were rather different. For example, not one speech went by without a mention of Oskar Lafontaine, who seems to have virtually disappeared from our radar screens.

Some issues are still current. Tax harmonisation and its discussion has been touched on today. It is important to reiterate the view that however much tax harmonisation may be advocated from those on some Benches in the case of lorry fuel duty, it is not something that we Liberal Democrats advocate. We believe that that is the one area of flexibility available to national Governments within the

strict financial controls of the Maastricht treaty. It is an area in which subsidiarity is important and decisions are best made at the national level. We think that tax competition is a beneficial device in determining national economic performance and policies.

For all those reasons, we dismiss the view that tax regularisation should never be discussed. That is nonsense. It may well be in the British interests to consider ways in which we can come to a similar view about taxation levels. At the same time, using the veto where it is necessary to protect British interests is also an important issue. We shall study carefully the decisions taken at the Economic and Finance Council. I hope that the Chancellor will be able to make a statement at a later date about precisely what has been decided.

The Minister of State, Foreign and Commonwealth Office (Ms Joyce Quin): I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for giving way because that allows me to put on record that the withholding tax was not agreed today in ECOFIN. The council agreed to submit a report to the Cologne Council, highlighting our concerns about the eurobond market. Indeed, the Chancellor has promised ECOFIN a report in June on our position and difficulties with aspects of the proposed directive.

Mr. Heath: I am most grateful to the right hon. Lady for assisting us with that information. No doubt, those are the rather amorphous clauses to which one hon. Member referred. We must look in detail at that decision.

Kosovo was an afterthought in my comments of 3 December, but it is at the forefront of our discussions today. I am grateful to the Foreign Secretary for what he told us about the present situation, although the House may have to be further informed before the break for our recess on the rapidly changing situation, which involves the accumulation of troops. As the right hon. Gentleman would expect, Liberal Democrat Members very much welcome the fact that a decision appears to have been taken at least to provide the option of a peacemaking rather than a peacekeeping force through the accumulation of troops. The window for that to take place was narrow. If that option is what the Foreign Secretary has brought back from Washington, I welcome it.

I must repeat the question that I put to the Foreign Secretary at last week's sitting of the Select Committee on Foreign Affairs, which he was good enough to attend. A stark choice faces NATO in the execution of the war. Two options would remove the need for that choice. The first is the capitulation of Milosevic, which is devoutly to be wished and of which there are some signs in the information emerging from Serbia about a weakening of his position, both politically and militarily. However, that is by no means definite. The second is that we make an open-ended commitment to an attritional bombing campaign. I do not believe that that is acceptable or sustainable. If we set aside those options, the choice boils down to two alternatives. First, we could use ground troops effectively in sufficient numbers to finish the job that we have started. I do not dismiss for one moment the substantial logistical and strategic problems with that course. Secondly, we could maintain the line that NATO appears to have adopted hitherto, that we will not use ground troops except in an entirely permissive situation. The natural corollary of that is that we accept a negotiated settlement.

I ask the Minister to confirm again the point that I made to the Foreign Secretary. If there were a negotiated settlement as part of the endgame, apart from the conditions that are already clearly laid down as the objectives of the campaign, will the territorial integrity of Kosovo be maintained? By that I mean that there will be no partition by negotiation and no de facto partition arising from a partial withdrawal of Serbian forces or a zonal deployment of international forces that created a Slavic zone in the Kosovo province. Will she confirm that there can be no question of immunity for Milosevic or the key players in Serbia from prosecution by the International War Crimes Tribunal? Will she confirm that whatever solution emerges must be, because it would be a failure if it were not, acceptable to the refugees congregating in the front-line states?

I hope that there will be an opportunity at Cologne to consider further the support that this country and the European Union can give to the front-line states. I have often reiterated my concern about the position in Montenegro. I welcome the fact that the Foreign Secretary is due to meet Mr. Djukanovic tomorrow.

Mr. Robin Cook: Today, and in about five minutes.

Mr. Heath: In that case, I must make my point quickly. The position adopted by the Government of Montenegro has been heroic. They have a very large number of refugees on their soil without the obvious means of support that have been provided to other countries. We must do all that we can to ensure the protection of Montenegro's Government and people, and when the war is over, we must provide them with the support that they need to rebuild their economy. The same applies to Albania, Macedonia and to that most unlikely recipient of refugees, Bosnia-Herzegovina. It has not been much reported that the Bosnians have 21,500 refugees on their soil. Few European countries can be less able to meet that economic burden.

A major objective of our diplomatic effort in the near future must be to provide support for all the Balkan countries to create stability. The Royaumont process is one way of doing that but we need to go much further with a stability pact. We also need to consider the countries of the Caucasus and central Asia, which have taken a positive view of what NATO has done and put vital pressure on Russia.

In considering the consequences of the Kosovan situation, we must re-examine the European defence and security dimension. As might be expected, I agree with my right hon. Friend the Member for Yeovil (Mr. Ashdown) when he says that the European Union is a political heavyweight but a military lightweight. The Cologne summit may be the first opportunity to make the point forcefully to our European partners that they must share to a greater extent the burden of European security and make the contribution that is essential if the European dimension is to be a reality.

That does not mean a common European army, and I do not see why it should be interpreted as meaning that. It means that a European dimension must be firmly embedded in NATO. That is what every member of NATO, including America, wishes, but we must act to make the early steps taken at St. Malo a reality. That might include a Europe-wide defence review. It certainly must mean closer

[Mr. Heath]

co-operation on procurement and development, and—something dear to the Foreign Office—stronger controls on arms sales.

If development of a common foreign and security policy is coupled with the enlarged European Union, which I think is critical to the future security of the European continent, that, by its nature, redefines the relationship with Russia. No hon. Member needs reminding that Russia has gone through a difficult political period, not least in the past few weeks. There was a risk that Russia would be rudderless this week. Happily, that is not the case. There is still a President, Government and Duma.

Dr. Godman: Is the hon. Gentleman aware of the lively debates on a European defence review in the neutral states, such as Sweden, Finland and the Irish Republic? I think that the Taoiseach and the Government of the Irish Republic are anxious to sign up for the "Partnership for Peace" initiative, and similar debates are taking place in the other two neutral states.

Mr. Heath: The hon. Gentleman is right. It is interesting that from several different directions there is a view that we must get the principle of European security right and that we cannot simply rely on the Americans, although we welcome and depend on our friendship and alliance with them and the other transatlantic forces. The CFSP will be effective only if it engages positively and carefully with Russia. We must recognise that as an EU priority in the months ahead. That should include not only Russia but Ukraine, which is often forgotten, and, if possible, Belarus.

The middle east has not yet been mentioned but I hope that it will be a key issue at Cologne. Hon. Members on both sides of the House have warmly welcomed the election of Ehud Barak in Israel. We should also greet that election with realism, because it was largely a referendum on the popularity of Binyamin Netanyahu rather than on the prospects for the peace process and the steps that need to be taken. Nor should we underestimate the difficulty of forming a united Government in Israel, let alone establishing a consensus on the way forward in the peace process. The difficulties are formidable and they will need our assistance. Let us not leave it to the Americans to be the only brokers of that peace; let the European Union take a real initiative.

Mrs. Louise Ellman (Liverpool, Riverside): Does the hon. Gentleman agree that the form of the Government of Israel is a matter for the people of Israel and will largely be the product of their electoral system? Does he agree that while it is right that the European Union and others do their utmost to secure peace on the basis of Oslo and the Wye accords, it is ultimately a matter for negotiation between the Palestinian people and the Israeli Government?

Mr. Heath: Of course, the Government of Israel is a matter for the Israeli people. I should not dream of intervening in that process. However, this country and other member states of the European Union may have a part to play in forwarding the peace process—as the Berlin declaration set out. I hope that we can build on that and that, where we can provide support for that process and for the process of international law, we shall do so. The middle east is an important part of the world; it is of critical strategic importance. It is an area in which many people in this country have a real interest.

In relation to what are unflatteringly described as the Amsterdam leftovers, there are rather a lot of them. Given that the Amsterdam summit was rather a jejune feast at the best of times, it is rather perverse that the leftovers seem more extensive than what was agreed. However, we must now make significant progress. There is a great imperative for reform, not least in the matter of the Commission and the way in which the EU does its business. Liberal Democrat Members want to see the reform of politics in Europe, exactly as we want to see the reform of politics in Britain. It is the same process, but it takes place at different levels. Our objectives are consistent.

The wastefulness and mismanagement in the EU which were highlighted by the Court of Auditors report represent an open sore in the relationship between the EU and its member states. My party and I believe that there can be no compromise on corruption, no weakness on waste and no respite on reform. The episode that took place early this year has shown us a European Parliament that is beginning to grow in stature. However, having said that, the Parliament remains incoherent in its response to what happened. The socialist group defended the indefensible—cuddling up to Jacques Santer when it should have treated him with a great deal of care in relation to his defence of the European Commission. We also saw that Conservative Members of the European Parliament were unable to unite either to give support to Mr. Santer, who is a putative colleague on their Benches—I believe that he will be sitting with the Conservatives in the next European Parliament—or to disown him. That lack of ability to take coherent action was signposted by that admirable fellow Pat Cox in his proposals to name and shame the Commissioners who had been criticised. In effect, the European Parliament ducked the challenge. It has continued to do so in its reaction to matters such as the statute and the expenses. The Parliament is allowing the impression to be given that it is wedded to unacceptable practices that no Member of this House would want to defend.

Miss McIntosh *rose—*

Mr. Heath: Perhaps one Member wants to do so. I give way to the hon. Member for Vale of York (Miss McIntosh).

Miss McIntosh: I should be interested in the hon. Gentleman's views on why the leader of the socialists in the European Parliament tabled a motion calling for the sacking of all the Commissioners and then—as my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Folkestone and Hythe (Mr. Howard) pointed out—withdrew it as soon as it looked as if it would be adopted. Does the hon. Gentleman agree that that is extremely odd behaviour?

Mr. Heath: I agree. That behaviour was shameful. The measure was an artifice, designed to try to buy time for the Commission in an unacceptable way. I find it equally unacceptable that the group of which the hon. Lady is a member was able to split three ways over the same issue,

but that is another matter. The fact is that there was a need for the European Parliament to take a lead. I point out to the Minister of State that the fact that Mrs. Edith Cresson is still in post is preposterous, as many people outside the processes of the Parliament agree.

We need a new intergovernmental conference—there is a great deal for it to do. Its work will not lie merely in salvaging the fudge over the reform of the common agricultural policy, which is unsustainable in its current form. As a representative of a dairy farming area, the dairy farming agreement will not be sustained any further than the next meeting of the World Trade Organisation—the agreement will not pass the necessary tests. The policy is not the right recipe for allowing enlargement; that is a serious problem.

We also need some serious institutional reform to prepare the EU for the next decade and beyond. We need to entrench the diversity and decentralisation that many Members of this House want to see. We need the completion of the single market. When the updated league table is produced, it will be interesting to see whether it is similar to the one produced at the last juncture at the end of 1997, when only 70 per cent. of the relevant legislation had been implemented nationally. At that time, the United Kingdom was one of only five states to have implemented 95 per cent. or more of international market legislation. Will the rest of the states catch up? Will the single market be a reality?

We need to find a way to codify properly the principle of subsidiarity that is so important if we are to bring power down to the lowest level. We must be clear that what can be done locally and regionally will be done locally and regionally, that what has to be done nationally is done nationally and that only what must be done at a European level is carried out at that level.

We hold this debate in the shadow of the European elections. The right hon. and learned Member for Folkestone and Hythe (Mr. Howard) indulged himself with a little low-intensity electioneering. I was disappointed; in the past, he has been more robust, but perhaps he is looking forward to his additional hours of leisure during the next few months. Today, I did not think that he was running on all four cylinders in his electioneering function. Alternatively, it might have been because he represents only a fraction of the Conservative party and he was unable to unite all its members.

There were 18 years of Conservative Government; we know what that did for our status and our position in Europe. We know the result of Conservative non-engagement. There is a vice of which I was sometimes accused when I used to play rugby.

Mr. Stephen Pound (Ealing, North): I hope the hon. Gentleman did not enjoy a line-out with Lawrence Dallaglio.

Mr. Heath: The hon. Gentleman is very quick. I left him that opening and he filled it.

In rugby, members of the pack are sometimes accused of flanking—hanging around at the side of the pack, hoping to do something flashy to please the crowd, but not providing any useful support to the rest of the team. When the Conservatives were in government, they had a record of flanking on Europe. The alternative is to get stuck in. It is time that we got stuck into Europe; only by being fully engaged can we bring about the reforms that are needed. I hope that Members of the new European Parliament—from whichever party they come under the new system—will get stuck in. I also hope that the Labour Government will do so.

The Government show a strange reticence; they know that they should make progress over Europe, but they oscillate from one side to the other. They oscillate from Mr. Murdoch to the focus groups. They are so busy oscillating that we end up with a quivering mess in the middle of the road; that does not provide the progress and leadership in Europe that we need. If we are serious about creating a more successful Europe, in terms of its structure and economy and the way in which its citizens perceive the EU, we must create a Europe that is more decentralised, democratic and diverse. That is a genuine agenda for Cologne. I hope that the Minister who replies to the debate will be able to convince me that the Government share the Liberal Democrat objective of making that agenda a reality in the months to come.

Mr. Francis Maude (Horsham): On a point of order, Mr. Deputy Speaker. Have you received a request from a Treasury Minister to make an urgent statement to the House about developments at the ECOFIN Council in Brussels, which the Chancellor of the Exchequer is attending today? There is evidence that those developments go directly against what the Chancellor told the House only 10 days ago. On that occasion, he made it clear that:

"the United Kingdom will not accept any directive that requires member states to introduce a withholding tax."

He said that twice. Later, he stated:

"the UK will not accept any directive that requires members to introduce and impose a withholding tax."—[*Official Report*, 13 May 1999; Vol. 331, c. 405.]

The Chancellor gave a clear commitment that the United Kingdom Government would veto any directive that imposed a withholding tax. It is now clear from the conclusions reached at ECOFIN that that is simply not the case. The United Kingdom Government have committed themselves to submitting a technical paper on the exemption of one part of the market from that directive. This is a matter of great importance. Thousands of jobs in the financial services industry are at risk and people need to know what is happening.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. I think I have got the sense of the right hon. Gentleman's point of order, which is developing into a speech. I have not received a request from the Government to make a statement about that matter—although they are able to do so at any time. The Minister who will reply to this debate may be of a mind to refer to that issue later.

6.11 pm

Mr. John Cryer (Hornchurch): I was interested to hear the hon. Member for Somerton and Frome (Mr. Heath) talk about decentralisation and the European Union. His comments seem to be at odds with the direction in which the European Union and the European Commission have been moving in the past 20 or 30 years. For instance, what does decentralisation have to do with the treaty of Maastricht and the concentration of real economic and political power in fewer and fewer hands?

[Mr. John Cryer]

I am always fascinated to hear Conservative Members such as the right hon. and learned Member for Folkestone and Hythe (Mr. Howard) refer to the abandonment of the veto. The single greatest abandonment of the veto occurred in 1985 when the Conservatives pushed the Single European Act through Parliament. Some serving Members of Parliament helped to push that legislation through: it was Mrs. Thatcher's great stand against the Brussels juggernaut.

I have always believed that the Conservative party managed to secure the worst of all possible worlds in its policy towards the European Union. The Conservatives managed to wrap themselves in the union jack at home—playing an appallingly nationalistic card that was entirely counterproductive. They then went to Brussels, Strasbourg or wherever and lay down and died in front of any treaty that was foisted upon them.

The United Kingdom joined the European Community in 1972 without any mandate from the British people. It was a Labour Government who held a referendum in 1975. We then had the Single European Act 1985, the common fisheries policy and the common agricultural policy. Finally, we witnessed that great victory for Conservatism: the Maastricht treaty, which was signed by the right hon. Member for Horsham (Mr. Maude), the shadow Chancellor. It is a shame that he is not in his place at present. If he is to respond to the debate later, I look forward to his sharing with us his special thoughts about how it feels to have been the British politician who put his name to the Maastricht treaty. He has never given us his views on that subject. *[Interruption.]* The hon. Member for Chesham and Amersham (Mrs. Gillan) may whinge from a sedentary position, but the fact is that the right hon. Gentleman put his name to the Maastricht treaty and has done nothing since then but criticise it. I would dearly love to know why he signed that treaty in 1992.

Mrs. Cheryl Gillan (Chesham and Amersham): I was not whingeing from a sedentary position; I was simply remarking how ill informed the hon. Gentleman is. If he thinks that my right hon. Friend the Member for Horsham (Mr. Maude) is to make the winding-up speech for the Opposition, he is obviously in the wrong debate.

Mr. Cryer: In that case, why was the right hon. Gentleman in the Chamber earlier? He seemed to be making some notes—but there we are. Perhaps he will share his thoughts with us on another occasion. I look forward to that immensely.

Returning to the European Union—after that irrelevant intervention—I have always opposed the single European currency. I have made that clear both inside and outside this place. It is not because I am a little Englander—unlike many Conservative Members—or because I am a nationalist. I oppose the single European currency because I am an internationalist and I think it would be dangerous for people in Italy, France and Germany, as well as for working people and the democratic institutions of this country.

My objections to the single European currency are not economic—although plenty of criticisms may be levelled in that regard—but essentially political. The single European currency is basically a political project about the creation of a European super-state. The pro-Maastricht campaigners on the continent are quite open about that. They have always been Euro-federalists; it is only in this country that there is some equivocation among EU supporters about political integration.

I have always wondered why the supporters of Maastricht are so enthusiastic about transferring power from elected institutions to unelected bankers sitting in Frankfurt or Bonn who are accountable to absolutely no one. Why is it such a great victory for the democratic process that power over interest rates should be concentrated in the hands of a few unelected, unaccountable people sitting in a board room somewhere?

I will give hon. Members an example of the European Union's unaccountability. Before the launch of the euro at the beginning of the year, I saw an interview with the President of the European central bank, Mr. Duisenberg. When asked exactly what would be revealed about the decisions made by the board of the European central bank, he replied that the voting patterns of individual board members would not be disclosed as that would leave them vulnerable to pressure in their countries of origin. That is what democratic accountability is about: exposing oneself to pressure.

Our constituents may ask us to vote a particular way on a particular issue and to make a particular representation. At my last surgery, a constituent asked me to support the death penalty. I had to be honest and said that I would not support the death penalty in a million years. That constituent must now decide whether he will support me at the next general election. The bankers on the board of the European central bank will not be in that position; they will not be exposed to any public hostility or approbation.

As to democratic accountability generally across the European Union, I am absolutely convinced—this is a fairly obvious point—that the small, closed, rich, white shop, which is what the EU has always been, has led to the abuses of power and the corruption that we have witnessed in recent months. It has led also to the European Union's treatment of poor third world countries, which I can only describe as imperialistic. I refer my right hon. Friend the Minister to the report by the International Development Committee entitled " The Future of the EC Development Budget". In its conclusion, the Committee states:

> "Recent fraud allegations have undermined the reputation of the European Commission. This report tells the story of an external assistance budget, unfocused, uncoordinated, ineffectively implemented and—to use the words of the Secretary of State—'skewed quite dreadfully against the poorest'".

That is the record of the European Union in the third world viewed against the backdrop of its attempts to push poor third world countries into deeply disadvantageous and exploitative trade agreements with western EU countries in order to allow multinationals and big banks to exploit those third world countries more effectively. So much is revealed in a previous report by the International Development Committee about the Lomé convention.

Yet the European Union has somehow managed to maintain with some sections of the population a nice, cuddly, liberal image. The EU has perpetuated the myth that it is terribly nice to people, whereas it has behaved absolutely appallingly towards some of the poorest countries in the third world.

As to accountability, I would be interested to know the Government's intentions on the proposed referendum on the single European currency. To what extent are the Government prepared to support the recommendations of the Neill report about future referendums? Will the Government remain neutral in a referendum, as recommended in the report, or will they follow the line taken by the Labour Government in 1975? That was a perfectly honourable position, but it would be interesting to know which position the Government will take.

Hon. Members may remember—I was only 11 at the time, but I clearly remember it—that in 1975 the Wilson Government issued a document called "Britain's New Deal in Europe", which declared that the Government supported Britain's membership of the Common Market because we would retain a veto over all decisions that we did not like, and because there would never be an exchange rate mechanism, which would be a threat to jobs. Both those points now seem pretty ironic after Black Wednesday in 1992 and the Single European Act of 1985.

Will Ministers be allowed to voice their independent opinions during a referendum, as in 1975, or will they be expected to abide by the principle of collective responsibility?

I turn now to the European Union's spending on propaganda to promote the single currency. On 8 February, I wrote to the head of office at the European Parliament office in Queen Anne's Gate to ask questions about the spending of EU money—after all, it is our money because it comes from our taxpayers—on the promotion of the European Union and the single European currency. In that letter, I asked:

"What was the expenditure last year, and how much will be spent this year, in the UK by the European Parliament on promoting the European Union on mobile information units or exhibitions?"

Hon. Members will be aware that trailers are touring the country, distributing pro-single currency information left, right and centre, outside schools and elsewhere. No information or propaganda about the other side of the argument is being distributed.

Secondly, I asked:

"How much money did the UK office of the European Parliament provide last year to support the European Movement in its programme of seminars and events and how much is expected to be provided this year?"

That was on 8 February, and so far I have not received a reply from the office of the European Parliament. That is how much it seems to care about accountability. When a British MP writes to it for a few simple explanations of how it distributes its funds, what answer does he get? Absolutely none. I must say that it comes as no great surprise.

Will my right hon. Friend tell the House whether a White or Green paper or a consultation paper will be issued in the run-up to a referendum to explain to people objectively and dispassionately the pros and cons of the single currency? That is important, and the publication of such a paper would again repeat the events of the 1970s, when the Wilson Government issued a paper to explain the pros and cons of membership of what was then the European Common Market.

I turn now to tax harmonisation. If we go along with a single currency, the next step will be tax harmonisation; there is no alternative to that and it is an exercise in mendacity to pretend otherwise. There have already been extensive discussions about that under the auspices of ECOFIN. There have been no discussions about, for example, the harmonisation of income tax, but there are no guarantees that it will not be debated under the auspices of ECOFIN in future.

Ms Diane Abbott (Hackney, North and Stoke Newington): My hon. Friend will be aware that the Maastricht treaty—which I voted against because I read it from cover to cover—explicitly refers not only to monetary policy but to the need to harmonise fiscal policy. It is, as he said, an exercise in mendacity to pretend otherwise.

Mr. Cryer: My hon. Friend makes a good point. Anyone who has any doubts about the future direction of the European Union should read the Maastricht treaty. It is one of the biggest streams of right-wing monetarist poison that I have ever laid eyes on, which is why the previous Conservative Administration were successful in putting it through Parliament.

Can those who support the single European currency and try to argue that there will not be a move towards tax harmonisation say whether there is, anywhere in the world, a single currency but no single, central tax-gathering mechanism? Such a place does not exist, and any suggestion to the contrary does not hold water.

We are already experiencing cuts in regional funds. Objective 2 funds, for instance, will be spectacularly cut in the next year or two. Undoubtedly, one of the principal reasons for those cuts is that much greater funding is needed for the future single European currency. Any new currency requires enormous funds to create reserves, and funds must be moved around. That is why some of the structural funds are being withdrawn and money will be centred in the funds of the new single European currency.

With all due respect to my hon. Friend the Member for Doncaster, Central (Ms Winterton), we shall not gain the benefits that she has experienced in South Yorkshire and which she rightly welcomes. I come from Yorkshire, and the devastation of the mining areas is absolutely criminal; it was one of the greatest acts of political vandalism by the previous Government.

Dr. Godman: I intervene in case people from Northern Ireland are listening to the debate. I am not a defender of the European Union, but I point out to my hon. Friend that all EU member states have given a commitment to continue funding the peace initiative, which is so very important to the six counties and the Irish border counties.

Mr. Cryer: I thank my hon. Friend for that intervention. However, the withdrawal of funding from the structural funds will certainly intensify over the next years. I draw his attention to the McDougall report, which was recently released by the European Parliament. It says that the launch of any new currency requires enormous funding, equivalent to an income tax increase of several per cent. across the European Union. I do not hear many supporters of the single currency suggesting that we raise taxes by enormous margins to fund it.

There are one or two other matters to which I should like my right hon. Friend to refer in her wind-up speech. What progress has been made in reforming the common agricultural policy? That policy was another bequest that

[Mr. Cryer]

the Labour Government made to a grateful nation in the 1970s. The CAP is swimming in corruption; for example, funds are diverted to non-existent projects.

Will my right hon. Friend comment on the general state of the European Commission? Like other hon. Members who have spoken, I am amazed that Edith Cresson is still in power when she is clearly guilty of, at the very least, nepotism and mishandling funds, and probably something a great deal more serious. I look forward to my right hon. Friend's response.

6.28 pm

Mr. Stephen Dorrell (Charnwood): I enjoyed the speech of the hon. Member for Hornchurch (Mr. Cryer) on several levels. He referred at the beginning of his remarks to the fact that my right hon. Friend the Member for Horsham (Mr. Maude), the shadow Chancellor, was one of two Conservative Ministers who signed the Maastricht treaty. The hon. Gentleman has no reason to know that because of my right hon. Friend's interrupted service in the House, I assumed his responsibilities in the Treasury after the 1992 election and was the Treasury Minister responsible for taking the Maastricht treaty through the House. The hon. Gentleman said that he regarded the Maastricht treaty as the enshrinement of right-wing monetary discipline, and I am happy to accept that description of the treaty—it is one reason why I was happy to be the sponsoring Minister as the treaty went through the House in the early 1990s.

The hon. Gentleman made a number of points that touched a chord with me. He asked the Minister important questions about the terms under which a referendum would be held on British membership of the single currency, and I hope that the Minister will answer them directly. What the hon. Gentleman said about the developing world was interesting, and I shall return to that subject.

As the hon. Gentleman was speaking, I was reflecting on what I had in common with him on his approach to matters European. It is not a great secret that we do not have everything in common, but he and I are both wholly at ease with the histories of our respective parties in the development of the European argument through the 1970s and 1980s. He, I expect, is proud of the fact that his party's official line was to vote against British membership of the European Community in 1971. He, I expect, is proud of the fact that his party fought the 1983 general election on a commitment to withdraw from the European Union—a manifesto on which the present Prime Minister entered the House as a newly elected Member, which is an ironic reflection, in view of his new status as a Europhile leader.

I expect that the hon. Member for Hornchurch would have been pleased to vote against the Single European Act 1985, as well as the Maastricht treaty. I am proud of the fact that my party was responsible for taking Britain into the European Community, and I am proud of the fact that I voted for the Single European Act, and that I was one of the sponsoring Ministers for the Maastricht treaty as it went through the House.

One of the most depressing aspects of our present situation is that the whole argument about Europe is thought by some to be encapsulated in the argument about monetary union. Those who are in favour of monetary union are thought therefore to be Europhile, whereas those who are suspicious or sceptical of monetary union are thought somehow to be Europhobic.

Even worse, those who are in favour of, or who at least leave open, the option of British membership of European monetary union in the future are said by some—I quote words that I have heard many times—to be "in favour of going in", whereas those who are anti-monetary union are said to be "in favour of leaving". Those phrases are redolent with memories of the 1975 referendum campaign, when many of us thought that, once and for all, we had decided the question whether Britain was an active member of the institutions of the European Union or whether we were outside.

I hope that it is possible to conduct an argument about the future shape of Europe without concentrating exclusively on the question of monetary union, but for the record, let me say that I am agnostic on the question of monetary union. When I was the sponsoring Minister for the Maastricht treaty, I made it clear that I did not believe that the continental project was well judged. I do not believe that it has been introduced in circumstances that are ideal from the point of view of those who have participated in the early stages of monetary union. However, I also believe that, given that the project has gone ahead, we should be clear about two things.

The first is that the countries that have introduced the new monetary union are Britain's major customers. It is, therefore, in Britain's interests for their project to be a success. It is a simple rule of economics that what is bad news for our customer is bad news for us. Because it is in this country's interest for our customers' economies to be successful, I wish them well in their project, and I recognise that it is in Britain's interests for the single currency project to succeed. That is the first thing that ought to be clear.

The second is that if, in the fullness of time, we in Britain are persuaded that the project is a success, it will be in our political interests to join. I do not believe that that is clear yet, but if and when it becomes clear, it would be in Britain's interest to join a successful single currency on the continent.

If we are not "ultra" on the question—not against the single currency in all circumstances, but not in favour of it now—that seems to be about all that we can say about the single currency and Britain's prospective membership of it. If we are not in either "ultra" camp, we have a choice: we can have an everlasting dress rehearsal of the arguments that we may one day use for or against Britain's membership of the single currency, or we can move on to deal with the other issues that are on the European agenda and which are of more immediate interest to Britain in 1999. I shall take the second course in the debate.

There is an urgent need to articulate a clear vision of the kind of Europe in which we want to live, and to demonstrate how that broad vision can be translated into reality. So often the European debate is defined by what a participant is against. We are told that particular individuals are anti-euro, anti-federalist or anti-bureaucratic. There seems to be an interminable gallery of music hall rogues who are held up for us to take pot shots at, in order to define our position by reference to what we are against.

Is it not high time to set out clearly what our objectives are—not what they are not, but what they are? What kind of institution do we want to support and join, and why do we support such an institution? I have a simple way of summarising the type of European institution in which I want Britain to be an active participant. It is summed up by saying that I am a supporter of the Europe that is defined in the treaties—not a Europe described by the commentators, or a Europe held out as a distant prospect by the dreamers, but simply a Europe that is defined in the treaties.

It sometimes serves us well to pause and reflect on what is set out in those documents. First, the European treaties as they have evolved since the treaty of Rome define a union of nation states. The great majority of political decisions within the member states of the European Union remain outside the ambit of all the European Union institutions—in my view, quite rightly. Even that part of political decision making that is within the European Union institutions is not all within the institution of the European Community. That was the purpose of the intergovernmental pillar that was introduced in the Maastricht treaty, part of which I sponsored.

Even in the decision-making aspects that are within the European Community's ambit, a substantial proportion of those subjects is reserved for decision by consensus—that is, by unanimity. Only a very small part of the political decisions affecting member states of the European Union is open for decision by qualified majority voting, and almost nothing by simple majority voting. It is worth restating the extent to which Europe remains—in my view, quite rightly—a Europe of nation states with very little decision-making power affecting those nation states available to be decided even by qualified majority voting.

Secondly, we need to underline the proposition that the Europe defined by the treaties is a Europe about which the hon. Member for Hornchurch was sceptical—rightly, from his point of view—because it is a Europe committed to liberal economics. I mean liberal economics as properly understood, not as often defined by the modern day Liberal party. The Europe of the treaties is a Europe of nation states that recognise that they have a common interest in the efficient creation of wealth. That requires an open single market with effective pro-competition policy, effective action against state aids that would distort that marketplace and a clear commitment to open, free trade with the rest of the world.

I am not seeking to impose my interpretation on the treaties; that is all set out in the treaty of Rome, as amended by the later treaties. It was a treaty, in a word, written by the liberals. That is why, as an economic liberal, I support it, and why I am not surprised that the hon. Gentleman does not. The treaties were written not by woolly-minded liberals of the modern variety, but by liberals of the tough-minded radical variety that has come more recently to be called Thatcherite. They recognised the need not only to set out a general ambition to achieve a free and open marketplace, but to police that marketplace and ensure that those disciplines were not merely embraced in general, but applied in the particular.

The European Commission was set up to enforce the disciplines signed up to in the treaty, and the European Court of Justice exists to ensure that the institutions use the powers accorded to them and set out in that treaty. That is why I am in favour of a strong Commission acting within the ambit of the powers set out in the treaty. Many of my hon. Friends, and members of other parties as well, become concerned when institutions seek to use injudicious wording in treaties to develop powers that were not intended to be accorded to them at the time that those treaties were signed. The Europe defined in the treaty—one committed to liberal free trade with institutions to police those disciplines—is the Europe to which I remain as committed today as I was when I campaigned in the 1975 referendum.

Having set out that framework, we have to test the extent to which the Government are pursuing those ideas. Against that test, there are a large number of respects in which I find them wanting. First, and most obviously, I want to associate myself absolutely with the remarks of my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Folkestone and Hythe (Mr. Howard) about the Prime Minister's initiative, which was set out at St. Malo, on a European defence identity. I simply do not see where a European defence identity comes within the ambit of the core range of activities set out in the treaties.

Of course I am not against co-operation between European countries on defence issues, but I believe strongly that there exists an institution designed for that purpose. It is called the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation. Why reinvent it? Furthermore, why reinvent it within an institution that does not have either the history or the institutions to support such an identity? NATO has both.

Defence co-operation within Europe is better done within NATO, partly because that involves the United States and partly because it allows us to build on more than 50 years of successful co-operation with partners in defence through NATO. Perhaps most importantly of all, I also believe that defence should be regarded as a NATO responsibility because the agenda of the liberal economic Europe that I have described is huge and neglected. The last thing that we should want is for Europe's institutions to be diverted into looking at defence issues when they should be getting on with the huge and neglected agenda on the liberalisation of the European economy.

Dr. Julian Lewis (New Forest, East): I applaud the robust way in which my right hon. Friend is standing up for the role of NATO, but does he agree that a problem that our party faced in government is faced by the new Government? No sooner are people appointed President of the Commission than they proceed to outline a very different perspective on the defence of Europe—Mr. Santer did so originally and Mr. Prodi is doing so now—and announce straight away that they would like a common defence organisation, in which case this country could be outvoted in respect of its ability to defend itself by the other members of the European Union.

Mr. Dorrell: I also saw the remarks of Mr. Prodi and I have set out—with some clarity, I hope—why I disagree with them. Before Mr. Prodi referred to it, the Prime Minister was off to St. Malo talking about a European defence identity, but I would have hoped that, far from edging in such a direction, the Government would have drawn a distinction between defence, which is properly dealt with by NATO, and the huge agenda of liberalisation issues, which ought to be an urgent priority for handling through the European Community institutions.

Mr. Gapes: The right hon. Gentleman has referred to his commitment to the Maastricht treaty. Does not that

[Mr. Gapes]

treaty talk in terms of a common defence policy that might, in time, lead to a common defence? Therefore, the Government's St. Malo declaration, which was made with the French and supported by the Germans, is entirely consistent with the Maastricht treaty, which he says he supports. Why does he have such a problem with it?

Mr. Dorrell: I am not saying that the declaration is inconsistent, or that it is illegitimate for the Government to pursue their ambition; I am simply saying that it is wrong. Let me articulate the set of priorities that are in the mainstream of the economic agenda and which I think ought to be handled through the European Community and the Brussels-based institutions.

First, and most obviously, the exclusion of central and eastern Europe from participation in the single market of the old western Europe is becoming a stain on the modern history of Europe. It is worth reflecting on the fact that, this autumn, it will be 10 years since the collapse of the Berlin wall, and we have made virtually no progress in the inclusion of the countries of central and eastern Europe as full members of the European Union.

We were told that the Berlin summit would be the opportunity to confront the questions faced by the current European Union and the implications of the extension of Europe to the east, but we all know—it is a matter of history—that the Berlin summit funked the main issues that were placed before it. That is the first test that the Government have failed.

The second test—never mind the people in central and eastern Europe who are excluded from the benefits of a successful liberal economy—applies to the 10 per cent. of the people who live in the current member states of the European Union who are excluded from the benefits of liberal economics because of high unemployment. It is not a mystery why those countries suffer from high unemployment. We can see from our own experience, and from that of the United States and New Zealand, which has been repeated all around the world, that there is a direct relationship between labour market flexibility and low unemployment.

In some moods, the Prime Minister likes to align himself with that argument, but, looking at what the Government do rather than at what they say, they are resolutely going in the wrong direction in terms of policy here in Britain and the initiatives that they support within the European Union. They introduced the social chapter as a basis for new regulation of our domestic labour market, despite the fact that we had negotiated a situation in which it did not apply to Britain. Now we are told that, within the European socialist agenda, they propose to develop a pact for employment, the purpose of which, whatever the Foreign Secretary said earlier, is made explicit. It is to introduce

"agreed reductions in working time negotiated between the social partners".

Either the Labour party believes that reduced working time is part of the European social obligation and a necessary step towards the introduction of a socially just Europe, or it does not. It has put that proposal in its manifesto, but then says, "Oh no, it does not apply really." That is an unsatisfactory state of affairs, to put it politely, particularly because, elsewhere in that same manifesto, there is a commitment to a stronger social chapter, which will make worse precisely the kind of regulation that is leading to high unemployment in parts of continental Europe and which needs to be put into reverse.

I think that not because I am against sharing the success of a successful liberal economy widely through the Community, but because I am in favour of that. Such regulation, wherever it has been used around the world, has undermined living standards and excluded less advantaged people from the benefits of a successful economy. It is something that we in this country should vehemently oppose.

Ms Rachel Squire (Dunfermline, West): Does the right hon. Gentleman believe that the way for this country to compete successfully in Europe is to drive down pay and conditions of employment? Why has so much money from European structural funds had to come into this country to deal with the unemployment that was created by the previous Government, of whom he was one and who promoted the free market approach that he is espousing?

Mr. Dorrell: The hon. Lady should consult her pager. Her Government believe in liberal labour economics. All the rhetoric uses the language that I have just used. The hon. Lady's problem is that she looks at what the Government do and likes that, whereas Ministers hope that people will hear what they say and like that. The difficulty is not between the hon. Lady and me; it is between the hon. Lady and her colleagues on the Front Bench, who say one thing that she does not like and do another that, apparently, she does.

It is not just in the context of the labour market that the European socialist manifesto refers to steps in the direction of extra regulation. We see the same in its commitment

"to avoid harmful tax competition".

We debated that issue in the House some months ago, and I do not propose to repeat everything that I said then. Let me simply reassert my belief that tax competition is one of the best available disciplines to limit the ambitions of the political parties, and that it should be made as vigorous as possible. I am suspicious of any party whose manifesto states that it wants to limit harmful tax competition.

Nor is this debate just about internal structures. The hon. Member for Hornchurch was right to say that, too often in the past, the European Union—like, it must be said, the United States—has been a protected market, excluding imports from the developing world. I believe that the EU remains damagingly protectionist, from the point of view of not only the developing world, but European countries themselves. While I cannot agree with much of what the hon. Gentleman said, I hope that we may make common cause on the desirability of a commitment within Europe to put Europe in the vanguard of the liberalisation of world trade, and promote the idea of new round of liberalisation talks.

Sir Leon Brittan has promoted the idea of a millennium round of tariff reduction talks. When I compare the benefit that such talks, if successful, could confer on mankind with all the meretricious trash surrounding the millennium that we are invited to welcome, I can think of no better celebration than the launching of a meaningful process of

reducing tariffs that have excluded most of mankind from the richest markets in the world for the larger part of the century.

Mr. Wells: Are not sugar and textiles two products that the EU could gainfully consider in its efforts to reduce its protectionism in relation to the third world? If it offered that, we might indeed get some liberal economics going throughout the world.

Mr. Dorrell: As my hon. Friend will know, if I am drawn into a discussion of textiles, I shall have to declare an interest. Let me put it on the record that I am a director and shareholder of a family textiles business. As it happens, however, I wholeheartedly agree with what my hon. Friend says about both textiles and sugar.

Last on the list of issues on which I test the Government's visions for Europe's future is what I regard as almost the crowning absurdity of the various European institutions that currently exist. I refer to the regional and structural funds. It is hard to imagine anything more absurd than European national Governments' agreeing a European Union budget 40 per cent. of which is devoted to such funds, given that, as we all know, any Minister—however senior—who took a similar domestic spending programme to the present Chancellor of the Exchequer would be shown out without an interview.

The regional and structural funds reflect ideas of regional development that were fashionable in this country in the 1960s. To read descriptions of the way in which they are used is to take a trip down memory lane. It is absurd that we should use money to distort the liberal market economy that is set out in the treaties, which we in Britain—especially in view of our recent history—should unambiguously support.

Mrs. Ellman: Is the right hon. Gentleman suggesting that the major structural funds that are currently bringing employment to Liverpool, regenerating the city centre and giving support and skills to people in local communities constitute money that is being wasted, and money that his party would not wish to be spent?

Mr. Dorrell: I am crystal clear about the fact that the regeneration of Liverpool that has begun over the past 15 years is overwhelmingly a result of local initiatives on the ground: initiatives on the part of local business, focused on the development of the community, the infrastructure and the environment. It is not a result of blanket regional development funds. If such funds were the answer to the problem of high regional unemployment, we would have cracked that problem in the 1950s. The history of regional development, not only in Britain, but in every developed country—in European countries such as Germany, France, Italy and Spain—is that domestic Treasuries have scaled down such policies, because they know that they do not work; yet they persist in Brussels, as a kind of international social security budget.

Mr. Alan W. Williams (East Carmarthen and Dinefwr): Will the right hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Dorrell: No. I want to end my speech soon.

If the Government really want to stand four square for reform of Europe, the regional and structural funds are a natural target.

The Foreign Secretary has said that the Government favour European reform, and those of us who are pro-Europe can say amen to that. I agree with the Foreign Secretary that we need an ambitious programme of reform in Europe; the problem is that I do not think that the Government have shown the beginning of an understanding of what is necessary for the delivery of such a programme.

I believe that Europe—the 15 existing states of the EU, and the applicant countries to the east—can be the new tiger economy of the early part of the next century. The Prime Minister regularly tells us that he admires many aspects of the American economy; let him learn some of the lessons of that economy, and apply them in Europe. If he does that, he will unleash the most powerful and successful economy in the world.

The time for reform is now, as the Foreign Secretary rightly says. Unfortunately, that is a challenge that the Government have funked so far.

6.57 pm

Mr. Mike Gapes (Ilford, South): I want to change the focus of the debate slightly. First, however, let me say that it is unfortunate that the shadow Chancellor, the right hon. Member for Horsham (Mr. Maude), is not present. I understand that he tried to mislead the House by means of a point of order. I am afraid that the fact that Conservative Members do not even bother to stay to listen to a debate on which they have tried to intervene in such a fashion is a clear indication of the depths to which their party is sinking. As I understand it, the ECOFIN meeting had not agreed any directive relating to the withholding tax. No doubt the Minister of State, Foreign and Commonwealth Office, my right hon. Friend the Member for Gateshead, East and Washington, West (Ms Quin), will say more about that when she winds up the debate, but, as I have said, it is a shame that the shadow Chancellor is not here. No doubt we shall not see him again today.

The Foreign Secretary spoke of the need for Europe to develop its own defence capability and capacity, and a number of the documents made available to us by the Vote Office deal with defence policy. This is not the occasion for us to debate Kosovo, the reasons for our involvement there or the lessons to be learned, but wider issues are at stake relating to discussions now proceeding in the European Union and NATO about the European strategic and defence identity, and the proposed dissolution of the Western European Union.

I am not entirely convinced that the issues have yet been fully thought through. I say that in the light of what is clearly a divergence of opinion within the EU, and between the United States and Russia, about the future of European security in its widest sense.

Recently, I came across a quote from a poem written in 1918 by a Russian poet, Aleksandr Blok. It says:

> "Russia is the Sphinx. Rejoicing and grieving,
> And steeped in black blood,
> She gazes, gazes, gazes at Europe,
> Now in hatred, now with love!"

The problem we face in Europe today is how to deal with Russia, which, despite its economic and political weakness, its bankruptcy and its governmental crises, is still a major, strategic nuclear power. I do not believe that

[Mr. Mike Gapes]

any future European security and defence identity can be shaped—and certainly cannot have secure borders to its east—unless we have a proper relationship with Russia.

President Clinton, speaking recently to American war veterans about Kosovo, made clear his belief in the importance of a Russian political and military presence in any solution to the conflict. I welcome that. At the same time, a member of his Administration, his ambassador Mr. Verschbow, talked about NATO enlargement and the Baltic states. Referring to the NATO Washington summit, the official American embassy press release of 13 May said:

"He . . . 'gave a very strong endorsement' to further enlargement, and noted that the Summit communique referred to Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania by name."

The interpretation of that statement in the three Baltic states and in Russia will be that the United States wants NATO enlargement to include those three Baltic states. That is all very well, but the Washington communique also referred to the discussions going on in the European Union and the Western European Union about the relationship between the European strategic and defence identity and NATO. I, therefore, think that it is worth spending some time considering that issue in some detail.

Nothing is more important to the stability of Europe today than that Russia maintains a relatively benign orientation and approach towards our security. If we were to return to the depths of a new cold war, it would cause serious problems for our economic and social goals, for the diversion of spending, for increased military budgets and for other matters, and it would have a political impact in Europe. It would not be in anyone's interests if that were to happen.

Recently, NATO was enlarged to take into membership the Czech Republic, Hungary and Poland, and it celebrated its 50th anniversary. Coincidentally, but undoubtedly unfortunately, within a day of those celebrations the air strikes against Yugoslavia began. The interpretation of that action and the way in which it is used by the nationalist and communist parties in the Duma, and by people who want to foster an aggressive, anti-NATO approach in Russia, is very unfortunate. If hon. Members think that I am exaggerating a little, they need only refer to the useful third report of the Select Committee on Defence, "The Future of NATO: The Washington Summit". The helpful appendix in the back includes the statement submitted by the Russian ambassador dated 26 November 1998—which is before the enlargement took place. He makes clear Russia's deep opposition. I shall quote two sentences, which is enough to give the flavour.

"Especially sensitive is the idea of admission to the alliance of former Soviet republics, in the first place the Baltic States. It is an open secret that if any one of these states is enticed into the NATO we shall have to reconsider our relations with the alliance."

That was in November last year, and nothing that has happened in recent months, including the sacking of Mr. Primakov's Government and the internal crisis, gives rise to any optimism that the Russian mood has changed for the positive.

Mr. Ian Taylor (Esher and Walton): There is an additional problem with the Baltic states. I have yet to meet a NATO general who is convinced that we could secure the Baltic states from attack. That has a knock-on effect on the European Union. It would be inconceivable that the EU would expand into territory that it could not provide a security guarantee in some form.

Mr. Gapes: I am grateful for that intervention, as I shall deal with the EU and the European security and defence identity in a moment. Anyone who has been to Estonia, as I have, and has seen where Narva is in relation to St. Petersburg will know that these areas are very close, and it would take no more than a few minutes for troops to go from one side of the waters to the other.

In his opening remarks, my right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary mentioned the complications for countries that are members of NATO but not members of the European Union. He did not mention countries that are members of the European Union but not members of NATO: specifically Sweden, Finland, Austria and Ireland. There has been a continuing debate among the neutral and non-aligned states in the EU about the relationship between the WEU, which they also do not belong to, and the EU. If the WEU is to be completely removed from the scene, and if the EU is to take on all the functions of the WEU, the nature of the EU will significantly change. It will change not only for potential applicant members in the future, but for some existing member states.

I have been a long-time supporter of NATO. I even wrote a pamphlet 10 years ago that was not popular with people in the peace movement at that time, in which I argued strongly for Britain to stay in NATO. I describe myself as a left-Atlanticist, and I still take that position. However, I believe that it is time for Europe to have a much stronger defence identity. It is time for us to be able to take action as Europeans together in our own continent without having to rely on the whims of Congressmen from Alaska or Nebraska. We must be able to do that, as Europeans, but we must do it sensitively and we must take account of the political sensitivities and realities of this continent and our neighbours.

The communique that came out of the NATO summit on the future strategic concept of the alliance said:

"This process will require close co-operation between NATO, the WEU and, if and when appropriate, the European Union."

How is that appropriate relationship to be worked out? Difficulties have already been highlighted by other member states. Only a few days ago, the Foreign Minister of Sweden, Mr. von Sydow, made a speech to an important meeting of the WEU Council of Ministers. He made an important statement when he talked about the Petersburg tasks that are currently on the agenda and are undertaken by the WEU. He said:

"We must not risk losing the current momentum in the debate by entering into the issue of common defence. Just to be clear: Sweden cannot accept that the mutual defence commitments of article V of the Modified Brussels Treaty be included in the EU."

That is the Swedish position. There are similar concerns in other countries.

I hope that our Government, while pushing for greater co-operation with France over the St. Malo declaration—which I support—and for greater co-operation with Germany, will retain their traditional close relationship with the Nordic countries, particularly their excellent relations with Sweden and Finland, so that, in establishing the European security and defence identity and a much

stronger European voice within the Atlantic alliance, they do not risk making the position more difficult for existing EU members that are traditionally neutral and non-aligned, and do not, in effect, block future enlargement of the EU by other states.

On economic grounds—certainly Estonia is already there—there is no reason why the Baltic states should not be able to be involved in the European Union. The Finnish-Estonian linguistic relationship, the economic relations between countries from one side of the Baltic to the other and the good relations in the region, all point to the fact that there is a logic in having countries on both sides of the sea within the European Union.

That could help Russia economically. The European Union would be so close to the Russian market; Russian trade could go backwards and forwards into the EU. It would be a good way to build European security, but my worry is that, if we complicate the matter by getting into a discussion about defence, whereby the Russians fear that NATO's borders are being expanded to the borders of St. Petersburg, we will set back that economic development and non-military aspects of security.

It is important to recognise that, whatever the outcome of the current difficulties in the Balkans—the European Union clearly has an important role to play in the reconstruction programme and in building civil society, not just in Serbia, but in Croatia, Macedonia and other states in the Balkans—we need to move our focus a little further, to recognise that other potential areas of conflict border the continent of Europe, and that our relations with Russia, and future relations between all of Europe, east and west, remain vital to us all.

7.13 pm

Mr. Michael Jack (Fylde): I am grateful to you, Mr. Deputy Speaker, for calling me to speak at this stage in what is a very interesting debate.

One of my sadnesses is that, as I look at the place where the press would normally sit to report our affairs, I find large vacant spaces. It is a matter of some considerable sadness that a debate on matters that affect the well-being of the United Kingdom, our position in Europe and the world will go largely unnoticed by the media, who are sometimes all too quick to comment and to criticise on some of the complex issues that right hon. and hon. Members have already touched on in the debate.

The hon. Member for Ilford, South (Mr. Gapes) gave us some thoughtful observations on many important security matters. I found interesting his focus on the role of Russia. Clearly, some people might have felt that, had there been a stronger, more stable internal position in Russia, it could have played a more decisive role in negotiations before the conflict in Kosovo developed in the way in which it did. It is interesting to see the role that Russia is now playing to reach, I hope, some form of resolution.

I was interested in the Foreign Secretary's remarks about the situation in Kosovo and the role it will play in the Cologne summit. It was one of the occasions when he perhaps did not use the word "intensify". On just about every occasion that any statement has been made on the matter, when it comes to military action and to the bombing, the word "intensify" is used, as if that will give some guarantee of success. Yet, what is success in the conflict? I find it difficult to understand the measure of success.

Success at the beginning was to degrade the Milosevic war machine to such an extent that ethnic cleansing would be stopped, but still the tide of refugees flowed, still we pressed on with the bombing campaign—understandably, in humanitarian terms. Listening to the Foreign Secretary this evening, success seems to be being redefined as creating the opportunities where ground forces will be able to enter Kosovo, taking the refugees back to where they came from. It shows the difficulty in understanding and, at times perhaps, in supporting elements of the Kosovar policy. The aims and objectives of the campaign have shifted.

The debate takes place during preparations for the meeting in Cologne. I make a couple of quick points on what should be on the agenda before turning to the main part and focus of my remarks: agriculture. I should like the Heads of State to reclaim the agenda for politicians in Europe.

Too often when I go on the doorstep campaigning, the impression that is fed back to me is that it is the Commission that runs Europe, yet it is the Council of Ministers—in the many ways in which that institution manifests itself—that gives the democratic element and democratic accountability to what happens in Europe. If public confidence is to be maintained in the European Union—at a time when the purpose and membership of the Commission have properly been the subject of discussion and questioning in the debate—it is vital that people understand that it is elected representatives who have the final say, whether they be in the Council of Ministers or, indeed, the European Parliament. If Europe is to safeguard its institutional development, recapturing in the public mind the fact that it is politicians who are in charge will be important.

I make a short appeal to the Minister to reflect to the Leader of the House that, to give that important element of accountability further solace, we should reconsider the way in which the House scrutinises European legislation. I am aware that some improvements are coming along, but they do not involve the House of Commons and its Members looking at European legislation early enough in the process.

We do not have debates and comment on some of the Green Papers and pre-directive or regulation documents. The Minister looks sceptical as I say that, but in terms of the scrutiny process—I have been on both ends of it—Members of Parliament do not get stuck in, if I may put it that way, early enough in the process, when new ideas are floated that have yet to formulate in the form of directives or regulations.

Ms Quin: Surely the right hon. Gentleman recognises the recent improvements that were introduced via the European scrutiny White Paper, and the changes to procedures in the House to allow hon. Members to have an early say on matters that would come before European Council meetings.

Mr. Jack: I acknowledge that. In fact, I said it in shorthand in my earlier remarks. I said that I recognised that some changes had taken place, but I am looking at the position further upstream. It may be that, in reality, those changes do deliver what I still believe is lacking in our system.

One of the sadnesses is that the Cologne summit will not consider any further changes to the common agricultural package, which are much needed. Recently,

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the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food was triumphing some great reform package, but, when one looked at what was agreed, one found that there was much difference between the rhetoric and reality.

The concern that British agriculture has about the whole question of reform arises against a background where, in the past two years, in real terms, farm incomes in this country have declined by 74 per cent. It is therefore hardly surprising that our farmers had hoped that the discussions on common agricultural policy reform would free them to use their efficiency in operating to the advantage of British agriculture. Sadly, the discussions did not have that effect.

The CAP reform package agreed in March neither meets the requirements of the World Trade Organisation, nor addresses the issues of preparing for European Union enlargement. Undoubtedly, the matter will have to be revisited.

The document prefacing this debate—on events of the past six months in Europe—mentioned, perhaps optimistically, the possible ending of the ban on British beef exports to Europe. It was a pity, however, that Opposition Members had to point out to the Government that invitations should be issued to European Union officials and veterinarians to inspect our facilities. The Prime Minister said that invitations had been issued to officials—to start the process of unlocking Europe's meat markets to our beef producers—but, at that time, they had not yet been issued. Had the Opposition not acted, the invitations would not have been issued until much later.

Sadly, not one ounce of British beef has yet crossed the channel for sale in European markets. Despite all the Government's triumphal rhetoric on the subject, British beef producers have not yet seen the result that they seek. I hope that the issue of speeding up the lifting of the ban will be addressed at the Cologne summit—if nothing else, in the margins—so that Europe's beef markets are once again open to our farmers.

Will the Minister have a word with the Heads of State also on the British pig industry—which is in desperate straits? The industry has not been helped by, for example, the French Government paying what seem to be illegal state aids to assist the French industry, while our own Government are sitting on their hands.

There would have been no movement on the issue of the French payments had it not been for Opposition Members' efforts in providing the Agriculture Minister with concrete evidence of them. He even challenged us—almost as a precursor to taking any action—to provide such evidence. So far, however, the Government have taken no action, and parts of our pig industry are facing extinction. The Government owe it to those producers at least to ensure that all our producers receive even-handed treatment within the European Union.

In March, the Minister of Agriculture returned from the meeting on CAP reform. Before the meeting, he said that he was in favour of scrapping quotas and shifting subsidies from production to income, and that the Commission's proposals did not go far enough. However, after the package was agreed, the Prime Minister—in *The Times* of 12 March 1999—dismissed all the Agriculture Minister's optimistic rhetoric by saying that the outcome was

"not satisfactory as far as we are concerned."

I agree with the Prime Minister on that point. At the meeting, the Minister of Agriculture effectively sat on his hands—he really did not have anything positive to contribute to it. From the intelligence that the Opposition have gathered from behind the scenes of the meeting, it is certainly clear that the Minister really did not do very much properly to represent the interests of Britain's farmers.

Perhaps that is why, on 11 March, the National Farmers Union issued a press release entitled:

"CAP Package 'Mixed Bag', says NFU".

Ben Gill, the NFU president, said:

"The package is a 'mixed bag' for UK farmers, with most positive and negative elements contained within it."

The situation worsened, however, 15 days after the package was agreed in Brussels—when it was dealt with at the Berlin summit, and there was a betrayal of British farmers. The rats, as they say, got at the package and started to unpick it. Only 15 days after the package was agreed, the NFU president was saying that the results of the Berlin summit were deeply disappointing. He said:

"The original agreement made by farm ministers has been partially unpicked and is now considerably worse. While superficially this deal may seem attractive there are significant hidden dangers.

British farmers will pay a heavy price for a deal which seems to have been made to allow some Governments to claim a symbolic victory."

He was indeed right about that.

The results of the unpicking were a reimposition of restrictions on British farmers, a reduction in arable area payments to British farmers, and delay in reforming the dairy regime—one sphere in which the efficiency of Britain's farmers really does shine—probably until 2006. If ever there were a betrayal of the interests of one of the most efficient parts of British agriculture, allowing that deal to be unpicked was it. The betrayal was most distressing.

Other member states seemed to triumph in the negotiations on the dairy regime. Greece, Spain, Ireland, Italy and one other member state managed to win an increased milk quota, whereas it will take years—until 2003, to be precise—before we receive a small increase in quota. Why was not British back-bone used in objecting to a settlement conferring a competitive advantage on those countries, at the expense of British dairy farmers? Our farmers are receiving prices that, in real terms, are the same as they were four years ago.

In the farming press, the Minister of Agriculture was telling us that the cosy so-called London club was meeting quietly with Denmark, Sweden and Italy to plot the downfall of the milk regime, which was restraining competitive forces in British agriculture. But—oh, dear—as soon as Italy got a whiff of more quota, Italy was off, the club collapsed, and the British Minister's back-bone went very soggy indeed.

All of those so-called developments add up to a so-called reformed CAP—which will cost Europe's taxpayers dear. Agriculture expenditure already accounts for over half of the Community's budget, and it is rising. In 2000, expenditure will rise to 37.3 billion euros. By 2002, it will have risen to 39.6 billion euros. After a small decrease, expenditure will rise again, in 2006, as the dairy reforms are implemented. Those costs will be a further

burden on Europe's taxpayers, and will go a long way in off-setting what the Agriculture Minister claimed would be a benefit to consumers.

Today, in just one line of his speech, the Foreign Secretary said that consumers will save £1 billion on their food bills. However, he forgot to add the salient detail that that estimate was predicated on the proposition that the savings will not begin until 2008. In fact, the reforms will create only £90 million savings in the first year.

Furthermore, the facts do not support claims that the CAP amendments will deliver real savings. Research provided to me by the Library shows that, in previous CAP reform, returns to producers have generally decreased, whereas shop food prices have increased. The research gives the lie to that much-vaunted claim that the reform will benefit Europe's consumers. Moreover, interestingly, the research also shows that food prices have decreased only in the potatoes and fresh vegetables sectors, neither of which have been subject to the current CAP reform.

Many elements of the reform have yet to be introduced. However, the Ministry—perhaps in a cost-saving mood—is arguing that the British lamb industry, for example, should be considering restricting its output, saying that it might be able to get better prices by doing so. Yet, the lamb industry is absolutely adamant that it wants the opportunity to sell competitively to Europe. There is seemingly a hidden agenda in MAFF to try to save money by such a measure. It is not very clever for MAFF officials to invite one of the most successful parts of British agriculture—a key feature in the upland economy—to cut back production.

I begin to wonder what is the Government's agenda for the British agriculture industry. If they really had the interests of British agriculture at heart, they would raise those matters at Cologne. Our agriculture industry is once again in a truly desperate position and I would have thought that it merited a mention on the Cologne agenda. It is an indication of the importance that the Government attach to agriculture that that item is missing.

7.30 pm

Mr. Alan W. Williams (East Carmarthen and Dinefwr): It is a pleasure to follow the right hon. Member for Fylde (Mr. Jack). I have participated in many agriculture debates over the years, but my comments this evening will be mainly on the single currency.

Relations with our partners in the European Union have been transformed in the two years since the Government came to power. Throughout their 18 years in office, the previous Administration seemed to be a reluctant member, very negative and destructive in their attitude. In particular, I remember Baroness Thatcher handbagging our European partners and trying to insist on her way. In the latter years of the Conservative Administration, there was the beef ban and the attempts to have it lifted by the absurd policy of non-co-operation, or vetoing many measures in which we believed.

The present Government were elected against that backdrop. We immediately struck a different chord and developed an excellent rapport with our colleagues in the European Union. Although we are not yet at the heart of Europe, that is our intention and we have adopted an attitude of co-operation and constructive dialogue. There were various opt-outs—on the social chapter and the single currency. It will take time to make good on the latter, but that is our policy. For the next five or 10 years we will be in there, punching our weight with Germany, France and Italy, building the Europe of the 21st century.

We are making good progress, despite the fact that the right hon. Member for Fylde commented on our slowness in reforming the common agricultural policy. His remarks could have applied to many such attempts over the past 10 or 15 years. I remember particularly the MacSharry plan that was announced by the then Conservative Government as the great breakthrough. The tone of their statements at the time suggested that it would solve the CAP's problems for ever more, but that was not the case. We are making slow and steady progress in reforming the CAP. Our budget rebate was assured at the Berlin summit. We are working for the enlargement of the Community and making good progress on Agenda 2000.

At the beginning of the debate, my right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary made a substantial speech on the war in Kosovo. No one in the House or in any NATO country wanted military action. In the early months of this year, my right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary worked extremely hard at Rambouillet to try to produce a peaceful outcome. However, Milosevic would not withdraw his forces and was already engaged in ethnic cleansing. Evidently, with summer approaching it was his full intention to continue, so we were forced to take military action. I strongly support the work of NATO, in difficult circumstances, and the leadership given by my right hon. Friends the Prime Minister and the Foreign Secretary, together with the United States Government.

NATO has worked to very high standards. We do not know how long it will take or what the outcome will be, but in the past few weeks I have detected a cautious optimism that the attrition in Serbia and on Serbian troops in Kosovo is slowly working. We hope that there will be a successful outcome before winter so that the refugees can go back. The EU and NATO will emerge stronger from the Kosovo episode. We did not want to take action, but we were forced into it. We had to stop Milosevic and his appalling policy of ethnic cleansing. Twelve months, three years and 10 years hence, Europe, the European Union and NATO will be stronger because of the action that is being taken.

I now come to the single currency which was launched in January. In the language of the market, we all expected the euro to be a strong currency that would rise in value against the pound, the dollar and other international currencies. It came as something of a surprise that during the past five months it has depreciated by about 10 per cent. However, that relatively slow start has not diminished my long-term enthusiasm for Britain joining the single currency when the economic conditions laid down by the Chancellor 18 months ago have been met and it is in Britain's economic interests to join.

Mr. Loughton: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Williams: Later, perhaps.

The pound is certainly far too high against the euro and other European currencies for us to contemplate joining. I wish that there would be a national debate on the correct level for our entering the single currency. I wish that we could hear the views of the CBI, the TUC, the Bank of England, the Government and the Opposition. I wish that

[Mr. Williams]

there would be a wide public debate over the next two or three years on what the long-term rate should be. Our experience of the exchange rate mechanism at DM2.95 to the pound is a depressing precedent.

Mr. Loughton: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Williams: In due course, but I want to develop my argument.

My own view is that a devaluation of the order of 15 per cent. is needed to achieve competitiveness. Perhaps the proper rate should be something like 1.30 euro or DM2.60 to DM2.70 to the pound.

In the past week or so I was concerned to read that my right hon. Friends the Prime Minister and the Leader of the House, in a speech and an interview, raised the possibility that the referendum on our joining the single currency may not be held in the second term of a Labour Government and that it may have to be delayed beyond 2001. We will not hold that referendum until the economic conditions are right and the Chancellor's five principles have been met, but there is a real problem in respect of getting the economy ready for the euro. My right hon. Friend the Chancellor has said that we do not want devaluation. The economic circumstances must be right before we can join.

The International Monetary Fund said last week that we cannot join at the current rate, because that would repeat the experience of the exchange rate mechanism. I agree that there must be devaluation before we can join. The following day, my right hon. Friend the Chancellor told the CBI that he would not contemplate devaluation. As far as he was concerned, the Bank of England's only target was the inflation target and it could not chase two targets at once. I believe that he is wrong, because all the countries that formed the single currency had to target their exchange rates. They had to have stable exchange rates before January 1999.

Mr. Loughton: I am following the hon. Gentleman's argument closely. He says that a fall of 10 per cent. in the value of the euro against the pound and the dollar is a slow start. I should hate to think what he would define as a fast start. Why does he think that the euro has been such a disastrous currency in its first four and half months, to the extent that many serious bankers in Wall street are saying that it is not a credible currency into which to put national bank reserves? Why does he think that it has gone down so much?

Mr. Williams: I am not a currency speculator, or an expert on the City, but my feeling, for what it is worth, is that the European economy is suffering from serious problems, particularly the high unemployment and slow growth in Germany and Italy. There is the added uncertainty that the war in Kosovo creates on the international exchanges. Speculators have tended to go to the safe havens of the dollar and the pound, because Britain is under such superlative economic management and has created a strong currency. In the longer term, as the European economy picks up and grows, the euro, judged over two or three years, will prove to be a strong currency. Nobody anticipated the early months being so difficult.

I said earlier that my right hon. Friend the Chancellor had set his face against devaluation. I think that he is wrong, as he was in 1992. During the months before Black Wednesday, the then Leader of the Opposition, the late John Smith, and the then shadow Chancellor, now the Chancellor, stuck out for the high value of the pound. At no stage did they say that devaluation would be the answer. I am afraid that my right hon. Friend has the failing of attaching himself to an over-valued currency.

Eddie George, the Governor of the Bank of England, is involved in cutting interest rates. In the report on the Monetary Policy Committee's most recent meeting, there were strong suggestions that the pound is over-valued and that interest rates should be cut to bring down the value of the pound. Over the next two years, I should like an aggressive policy of cutting interest rates. Already in the past 12 months they have been cut from 7.5 per cent. to 5.25 per cent. I should like further cuts to 4 per cent. over the next 12 months, and then to 3 per cent. the following year. Manufacturing industry certainly needs those cuts, as does the agricultural sector.

Yesterday's gross domestic product figures for the past quarter showed that we have achieved our soft landing. The figure touched zero in the past quarter. We do not want negative growth. The economy needs a stimulus from continued cuts in interest rates. Inflation is well under control and is not a problem. The figures last week were 2.4 per cent. for month-on-month inflation and a headline inflation rate of 1.6 per cent. The danger is that over the next two years we shall undershoot the lower limit of the target of 2.5 per cent., plus or minus 1 per cent. If interest rates were cut to 4 per cent. and then 3 per cent. over the next two years, we would achieve the devaluation that we need.

The argument against cutting interest rates too quickly is that it would add to inflation. What would a 15 per cent. devaluation over two years mean for inflation? About one quarter of our produce is imported, so a 15 per cent. depreciation in the pound would result in a one-off increase of about 4 per cent. in inflation. If that happened within one year, it would seriously affect the Chancellor's chances of meeting his target; but if it happened over two or three years, the additional inflation caused by devaluation would be half or a third of that 4 per cent.—about 1.3 per cent. a year over three years. That could be contained within the 2.5 per cent. target. That is why we need discipline in the other areas that contribute to inflation—the growth in average earnings or a too rapid growth in the economy.

My timetable for entry to the single currency involves the election in the spring or summer of 2001 and a referendum that autumn, enabling us to join on 1 January 2003. We would achieve our devaluation in the coming two years and would have a stable currency in 2002 and 2003.

There are problems of low economic growth in Europe, particularly Germany and Italy. The European economy is crying out for expansion. The European Union has a combined annual trade surplus of $100 billion. The American deficit is more than $200 billion. About 40 per cent. of that deficit is with Japan, which also has a surplus of about $100 billion. The United States has to carry the growth of the world economy, given the problems in south-east Asia and Russia.

How do we expand the European economy? Germany and Japan have a psyche of stagflation. Inflation is below 1 per cent. and they have enormous balance of payments surpluses, so why can they not stimulate economic growth? The normal stimulus is interest rate cuts, but rates are already very low—the European central bank rates are 2.5 per cent. Rates will have to continue coming down to 2.25 per cent., 2 per cent. or lower. Japan may even have to have negative interest rates. The economies need expansion. When that happens, the euro will prove to be a strong currency.

My constituency, west Wales generally, and the valleys have objective 1 status. I was surprised earlier that the right hon. Member for Charnwood (Mr. Dorrell), who has just left his place, seemed to imply that structural funds from the European Union were mistaken and counterproductive. For example, Ireland has seen rapid economic growth of some 7, 8 or 10 per cent. per year in the past six years and its objective 1 status has been a critical part of achieving such rates.

West Wales and the valleys, which form about half of Wales, have been identified as having a gross domestic product per capita of less than 75 per cent. of the European average, and so qualify for objective 1 status. I congratulate Welsh Office Ministers on their work in the past year to 18 months in making the case—and I congratulate the Government on their work at the Berlin summit and before in pressing the case for objective 1 status. Local government in Wales, the Welsh Development Agency and the new Welsh Assembly will all now be under pressure to ensure that we use that status over the next six years to 2006 to invigorate the Welsh economy.

I noticed an article in *The Observer* on 2 May about a task force that has been set up in the Welsh Office to consider objective 1 funding. It has set itself the ambitious target of economic growth of 4.5 per cent. a year over the next decade to increase Welsh income per capita to 90 per cent. of the European average from its present 83 per cent. I am pleased that that ambition exists at the highest level in Wales. British growth is at 2 per cent. a year, but the ambition is that objective 1 status will produce economic growth of 4 to 5 per cent. a year in Wales.

We will be in the remedial class for five or six years, thanks to 18 years of Conservative Governments and the destruction of our traditional industries. However, through European structural funds we will rebuild the Welsh economy. The Welsh Assembly will have the enormous responsibility of achieving that in the next five or six years.

7.53 pm

Mr. Ian Taylor (Esher and Walton): By this stage of the evening, we have, as usual, had a scintillating array of speeches, not least from my right hon. Friend the Member for Fylde (Mr. Jack), whose contribution to agriculture debates is like grass to grazing cattle—an essential ingredient. However, the two speeches that caught my ear were those by the hon. Member for Hornchurch (Mr. Cryer) and my right hon. Friend the Member for Charnwood (Mr. Dorrell), who are not in their places to hear me say that I agreed with parts of both speeches. I am sure that the hon. Gentleman would be more embarrassed by that observation than my right hon. Friend.

Both speeches touched on the crucial point in a debate on the European Union—what is it for and how does it benefit this country. It is not that those of us who are more positive about Europe are somehow a little less patriotic and those who are Euro-sceptic are more patriotic. Some of the positions taken in the debate in the United Kingdom are close to being absurd and they perpetuate myths. The reality is that this House must address what is happening in the European Union: we are in it and nobody has suggested that we are about to leave the club, but there are many complaints about what the committee are doing. However, we will ensure that the European Union is in accordance with our wishes only if we are a full member of the committee, and not just a member of the club. If we do not like what is going on, it is largely because we are not playing a proper role on the committee.

We do not need to be run by Brussels if we organise Brussels to do things that we want to be involved in. That leads to natural differences between Conservative Members and the Government. The Government's agenda differs from the Conservative one in many crucial areas. My right hon. Friend the Member for Charnwood mentioned a liberal economic approach to some of the solutions that Europe needs to address. We can have a healthy debate about that, but it does not make one side right and the other wrong, any more than the British public were right or wrong to decide to change Governments as they did at the general election. I am sorry that they did, but I shall not criticise the British public for doing so.

We make different judgments about how to run the European Union, but to make changes we must understand that the United Kingdom will never make changes just because we are British. The Conservative party's agenda in the European Union is stronger the more we co-operate with centre right parties in the EU. Therefore, I am the last person who would criticise the Foreign Secretary for having a socialist agenda. All I ask is that the British public recognise that it is a socialist agenda and make their decision on that basis. The British people should clearly understand what the Labour Government will do in the European Union in the next year or two, because it will be important in its effects. That is the rub.

The Prime Minister made an important speech in Italy a few months ago in which he made several statements that made a lot of economic sense. However, we do not find much of that in the agenda of the European Socialist party. That is why I criticise it, and not because there has been co-operation between socialist parties.

Some interesting things are happening in the European Union, which are partly caused by the single currency. I admit that I am in favour of the single currency in the long term: if it works, we should be a member, as my right hon. Friend the Member for Charnwood agrees. I do not wish to get sidetracked into the single currency debate, because the House has had the dubious privilege of hearing me speak on that matter on many other occasions. However, it is interesting—and this is why I agree with the hon. Member for Hornchurch—that the single currency is based on some sensible economic factors, such as debt control and inflation, which will mean that some of the continental economies will have to change.

[Mr. Ian Taylor]

In a single market with no frontiers—once the programme has been fully applied—we will see changes in countries that national Governments will no longer be able to control and to which they will have to adjust. Look at what is happening in France. Superficially, France has a socialist Government, but they have introduced more reformist legislation on the structure of French industry than the previous Gaullist or centre right Government under Alain Juppé was able to do. For example, there have been more privatisations. Only in the past week or two, the French Government—admittedly cloaked in obscurity so that they did not offend their own supporters too much—started to recognise that the cost of labour is a factor in unemployment. If one overprices labour, in normal circumstances that will mean that employers do not take labour on or employ more people outside the country. The problem in France is not an endemic European-wide employment problem caused by lack of growth, but the fact that the French Government have pursued policies that have provoked unemployment in France. Therefore the solution is down to the French Government. If they were to continue down the route that they have tentatively started on, we would see changes very quickly.

Italy is another example. In the past few days, we have seen something that used to be unthinkable: a relatively small Italian company, Olivetti, has beaten off the might of Telecom Italia. Olivetti was backed by Deutsche Telekom, although in a rather anti-liberalised fashion. However, the small company has won. At least, it has so far, because the Italian Government have tricks up their sleeve that they may or may not decide to use. Nevertheless, the small company has won in a competitive bid.

Incidentally, and almost unthinkably, a similar competitive bid is apparent in the French banking industry. Banque Nationale de Paris has lobbed a stone in the water of the previously comfortable marriage between Société Genérale and Paribas. I am not saying who should win that contest, but things are changing.

It is very important that the Minister of State, who will wind up the debate, recognises explicitly that some of the policies that the Government will need to pursue over the next year or two are a good deal more in tune with some of the liberal economic ideas of the previous Conservative Government, if Europe is to be able to provide the competitiveness, flexibility and restructured labour markets necessary for economic survival in an increasingly difficult global economy.

That is not the nasty capitalist plot described by the hon. Member for Hornchurch. It is sensible economics, and must be adopted by Europe's left of centre Governments. The Minister must try and convince her fellow members of Europe's socialist group that the sooner such policies are put into practice, the quicker will the European economy begin to compete in the international markets with what I suspect will be a slowly resurgent Asia and the continuing buoyancy of the United States.

It is sensible economic policies, rather than the comforting phrase that we are "more respected", that will determine whether this Government are capable of rising to the challenge of Europe. Respect is given only if actions deserve it, and it will take a lot to persuade me that the Government are going to carry matters through.

If Europe can compete in international markets, it can start to play a more influential role in other matters. The other point that I wish to make is that, if Europe really wants to follow through the NATO agreement reached in Washington, and to follow through implications of the St. Malo accord between France and the United Kingdom, it will need to have a vibrant economy and to contribute a higher percentage of national expenditures to defence.

The idea that there is a peace dividend that will enable countries to reduce defence expenditure is wrong. Many people thought that such a dividend would be earned after the collapse of the Berlin wall, but we were wrong. Paradoxically, we were wrong because the greater the world's uncertainty, the more important it is to have armed forces with the latest equipment and rapid reaction capability.

It is also important that Europe takes a leading role in defence, under the NATO umbrella, but it can do that only if it puts money into armed forces and weapons procurement. France and the United Kingdom traditionally have done that, but in both countries defence expenditures, as percentages of gross domestic product, are in decline. Every other European country in NATO has also cut defence expenditure.

I disagree with my right hon. Friend the Member for Charnwood in that I thoroughly endorse what I think was intended to be achieved with the St. Malo accord. I do not support the vague notion of a European army, as popularised by Mr. Prodi, whose idea appears to be that such an organisation would appear out of the blue. Wellington said about the British squares at Waterloo that they might not frighten the enemy but they damn well frightened him, and a European army would terrify me. I think that Prodi meant that a strong European foreign policy would have to be backed up with muscle.

We have the structure—NATO—with which to do that, but it is no good relying on the Washington accord and assuming that Europe can use NATO's equipment and resources even if the United States is not fully engaged. Europe must have sufficient resources of its own. If we want to ensure that, when other problems like the one in Kosovo arises, we can take decisive action—I hope with the Americans, but not determined by votes in Congress that may not go as we would wish—we cannot be dependent permanently on American intelligence or lift capacity, nor on American logistics support.

I do not mean that we should break up NATO and leave America to its own devices—the very opposite. We can engage America by showing that we can take action—with America's permission and agreement, but not necessarily with it playing a leading part—that is credible.

So it is clear that the two parts of my speech are linked. They represent a challenge for the Minister. I believe that Britain cannot stay outside the single currency and retain an influence on the creation of the single market which is so important for this country. However, if the currency is to be desirable, it must be based on a strong and competitive Europe, which in turn must change some of the practices that safeguard existing jobs rather than create new ones.

Over the past five to seven years, 87 per cent. of the jobs created in the European Union have been in the high-tech sector, not in the traditional industries. Yet for too many of our partners in this great exercise the policy is somehow to protect existing jobs rather than to create new ones. That is not the way forward.

The test is whether the Government have the willpower to convince our partners in the European exercise to make the critical reforms demanded by the single currency and to make the adjustments to the UK economy so that we can join. The creation of a stronger Europe will increase our influence in the world. That will mean that, in future, we will not get caught in a problem such as has developed in Kosovo. There, we know that ground troops will have to be used, although we cannot say so explicitly because—regardless of what was said at the Washington summit—we cannot deploy such troops without the logistic support of the United States.

8.7 pm

Mr. Tony McNulty (Harrow, East): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Esher and Walton (Mr. Taylor). His measured contribution did not excite too many enthusiastic nods on the sparsely populated Conservative Benches. He is far from the demented Euro-enthusiast described in the recent book by Giles Brandreth, the former Conservative Member for City of Chester. That author also mentions the Charnwood versus Fylde show that we have just witnessed. He writes:

"Little Michael Jack, eager beaver Financial Secretary, was on the line.

"'You know today's the day we publish the Finance Bill. I am supposed to be on the media spreading the good news on the economy, and what happens? I am pulled from every programme, and the whole thing is hijacked by the Secretary of State for Health'"—

that is, the present right hon. Member for Charnwood (Mr. Dorrell)—

"'banging on about Europe. It is so bloody frustrating!'"

That was on 2 January 1997, when the right hon. Member for Charnwood had his Pauline conversion to a more Euro-sceptic view. The right hon. Member claimed in his speech that he has held the same views all the time. However, the former hon. Member for City of Chester was a very close friend of the right hon. Gentleman—either that, or the book is fiction—and he writes:

"This isn't mere positioning. Stephen's view on the EU has changed markedly over the last three years, but the message has only filtered out fitfully."

So there we have it. The right hon. Gentleman—who once represented Loughborough, and now represents Charnwood—was always a Euro-sceptic, or at least shifted in that direction when there was a leadership challenge in the air. He did so well in that challenge that now he has settled into a more natural, central position, between the sceptics and the Euro-enthusiasts, demented or otherwise.

It is interesting that much of what the right hon. and learned Member for Folkestone and Hythe (Mr. Howard) said ranks very highly in the mythology, dishonest kidology and rhetoric in which the Conservative party indulges in. Like St. Peter in the Gospels, he denies his friends—those Tory Members of the European Parliament who sit on the executive of what he termed the European People's party—not once but at least two or three times.

Before the election, the Tories said that signing the social chapter would destroy jobs. Two years on, there is no sign of any destruction of jobs. In fact, more than half a million have been created. The piece of fiction produced as a manifesto by the Tories tells us that that is nonsense. It is certainly more—

Miss McIntosh: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. McNulty: Not in mid-sentence. The hon. Lady must be fairly tired given that she has two jobs, but I shall get back to her a little later.

The shadow Foreign Secretary, despite his denial, is more than aware of the Tory MEPs in the European People's party. They clearly say that there must be a

"gradual—but resolute—transformation of the European Community into a genuine political union on a federal model".

Those are Conservative MEPs. Does that not make a mockery of the opposition of the right hon. and learned Member for Folkestone and Hythe to a federal Europe? It certainly suggests that the Conservative party is perhaps being disingenuous, or perhaps something more malevolent than that.

Miss McIntosh: Perhaps the House and the hon. Gentleman should remember that when Britain signed the social chapter, we agreed to be exempt from it for the first two years. That is why there have so far been no major job losses other than those incurred from the working time directive and the minimum wage.

Mr. McNulty: I am grateful to the hon. Lady, but I hope, in her best interests, that her interventions in the European Parliament are slightly better than that.

On defence, too, we heard hot air and wind from the right hon. and learned Member for Folkestone and Hythe. The Government's proposals for European defence co-operation were approved by NATO at the recent Washington summit. All EU members of NATO signed up to them. There is an accord, as the hon. Member for Esher and Walton said. In NATO, and in some parts of the House, a grown-up and mature debate is occurring on European defence co-operation.

Another example of the naivety, malevolence, incompetence and disingenuousness of the Tories is the statement in their manifesto that there should be one parliamentary location for Europe. They suggest that it should be Brussels. Yet in their next breath, they say that they are totally opposed to any extension of majority voting. They cannot have one without the other. The French will never sign up to having Brussels as the only location for the Parliament. Under qualified majority voting, it will never happen. Perhaps the Luxembourgeois will not sign up to it either.

That is a good example of how replete the Tory manifesto is with dishonesty, but there are more. Their manifesto calls for a stop to the abolition of duty free, but it was the Conservative Government who negotiated that. What weasel words does the manifesto contain? I had the misfortune of having to pay for that lovely document, so the Tories got a few bob out of me; I tried using ecu, but they would not have them. "In Europe, not run by Europe" says about the protection of duty free:

"When plans were drawn up to abolish duty free, we set out clear conditions which had to be met."

[Mr. McNulty]

I have seen the conditions; they are not that clear. It goes on:

"They have not been met. So we believe that duty free must remain in place."

Since when have they thought that? Since 2 May 1997. Had they won the election, duty free could go to hell in a handcart.

There is nothing of substance in their manifesto. In three little lines, we can find one of the most historic flip-flop U-turns in Conservative party history, though God knows there have been plenty of them in the past two years. Here is another example from their pretty little manifesto. It says:

"We want to see humane treatment of animals across the whole of Europe."

Yet they troop in here to destroy the Bill on fox hunting and one of them—just one—singlehandedly destroyed a private Member's Bill on fur farming that 11 of the 12 remaining fur farmers in the country had signed up to. Somehow the right hon. Member for Bromley and Chislehurst (Mr. Forth) in his south-east London seat knows more about fur farming and humane treatment of animals than the fur farmers themselves do. That was abject nonsense from him.

Mr. Loughton: Why did the Government not support the Bill then?

Mr. McNulty: If the schoolchildren on the Back Benches want to speak, they can stand up and I will let them in.

Mr. Loughton *rose—*

Mr. McNulty: Oh, there he is.

Mr. Loughton: As the hon. Gentleman takes such exception to the passages on animal welfare, would he tell us why his Government did not support the fox hunting measure, why they did not rescue the Fur Farming Bill and why they have done absolutely nothing about live animal exports and a host of other promises in their manifesto that have not even been started on? Can he explain that?

Mr. McNulty: Yes, I can, and in one simple phrase—the hillbillies up the other end of the building. We have a full five-year programme covering all aspects of the EU, including animal welfare. We are implementing much of our manifesto, such as the minimum wage, the Health Bill and other matters to do with the EU. We will not have it all blocked by the hillbillies up the corridor.

The whole Tory manifesto is full of contradictions. It is all over the place, but that is just a symptom of the Conservative position on Europe. It is rumoured that the document is just their official manifesto. A minority report challenging some of it is expected out soon, and two unofficial alternatives are on the way as well as the one produced by the completely separate pro-European party. The Conservatives are all over the place, trying desperately to talk in code so that the xenophobes and Europhiles can somehow seem to be speaking the same language. It does not wash, and the people of Britain will see right through it.

I am glad to see that my hon. Friend the Member for Hornchurch (Mr. Cryer) has popped back into the Chamber. I want to share with him one matter on which we agree.

Mr. John Cryer: Is there one?

Mr. McNulty: One among many, but not too many. I agree partly with what he said about London, although I do not share his doom and gloom about objective 2 status. It is right to get London's problems on the record. Those Members who represent outer London—and the responsibility weighs no less heavily on our inner-London counterparts—have a difficult task in persuading anyone on our own side of the House, never mind the Opposition, about the peculiarities of London. There is a myth that the whole of London and all its 7 million or 8 million inhabitants are rich and that there is no poverty.

Mr. MacShane: Streets paved with gold.

Mr. McNulty: My hon. Friend is joking, but that myth is a real problem. The streets of London are not paved with gold. Fourteen of the country's 20 poorest boroughs are in London, and they cover a significant majority of London's total area. In one sense, the city is a wealthy one, but it also has some of the country's most deprived areas, a fact that must be got through to the Government and to Europe.

Average earnings among Londoners are 30 per cent. higher than the UK average, but in boroughs such as Hackney and Tower Hamlets, more than one in three adults are on income support. Gross domestic product in London is the highest in Europe, but London has more unemployed people than Scotland and Northern Ireland combined. The European Commission and the Government need to take those matters seriously when they work on objective 1 status.

London has suffered far more than most, not over the past two years, but over the past 15 to 20 years. There has been a serious decline in manufacturing, which has largely gone. I do not make some cheap party political point here: the decline was rooted in the early 1970s and the oil crisis, and it has continued from there. It has not happened over the past two years. It was not some wicked plot by Baroness Thatcher and her Government to get rid of London's manufacturing base. A range of geographic and economic circumstances have contributed to the decline. It has not been matched by increases in growth in the service sector, as some people might think. Between 1984 and 1996, London gained only 9 per cent. extra service sector jobs in comparison with the west midlands, which gained 30 per cent.; the south-west, which gained 34 per cent.; and Scotland, which gained 22 per cent.

I am not saying that London is poverty stricken, but some flexibility is needed in the measure for objective 2 status to capture areas with deep pockets of poverty. At the moment, objective 2 status is limited to a small area around the Lea valley. The Association of London Government and others have clear proposals to expand that area, but not, hon. Members will be happy to know, to cover the west end and some other parts of London—

certainly not the constituency of the right hon. Member for Bromley and Chislehurst, although even a borough such as Bromley, which is not dissimilar to mine in Harrow, has strong and affluent parts but also suburban pockets of poverty which are all the worst for being within seas of affluence.

We ignore at our peril, and not merely in London—I am sure that it happens elsewhere but I can speak only for London—the increasing difficulties caused by suburban pockets of deprivation. Precisely because they are suburban they need to be tackled differently from inner cities where an entire area is poverty stricken. That was my pitch for London.

I must return to the official Conservative manifesto document. If those who run—I use that term loosely—the Conservative party were honest, the leaflet would not be called, "In Europe, not run by Europe". One would only need three of those words. One could drop the "run by Europe" and move the "not" up front so that the title was honest and stated "Not in Europe". My hon. Friend the Member for Hornchurch would agree. He would have noted when he spoke that the cheers that he received were from Opposition and not from Labour Members. Clearly, that would be the honest position for Conservative Members.

Mr. Cryer: Will my hon. Friend acknowledge that I made a specific point and that I am not nationalistic in my views towards Europe—not a little Englander? My objection is towards the treaty, so I could be described as anti-treaty but not anti-Europe and I hope that my hon. Friend will acknowledge that.

Mr. McNulty: I will happily acknowledge that and I certainly did not mean to cause my hon. Friend offence *[Interruption.]* No, I did not and I shall not dwell on which treaty, or which aspect of which treaty, as we have discussed it at length before. I certainly would not dismiss my hon. Friend as a little Englander in any way. I shall save those remarks for Conservative Members—those who matter, of course, as I shall ignore those who do not.

Let us consider the next five-year plan—there are Stalinist implications here and I make no reference to my hon. Friend the Member for Hornchurch—according to the Conservatives. They may be waking up. All of a sudden, we are told:

"Conservative MEPs are determined to fight fraud and maladministration in Europe".

Where have they been? What were they doing for 18 years, both as a Government and as MEPs within the European Parliament? Not a whole lot.

When I had been barely three or four months in the House, I had the great pleasure to serve ad nauseam—no, I should say at length—on European Standing Committee B. We discussed at length the first year's auditors report. I was a member of the Committee long enough—I did not escape for a year—to be there when we discussed the second report. Both those reports preceded all the recent stuff about Commissioner Santer. They concerned the last two years in which the Conservative Government were in power in this country and the reports showed how the previous Government manifestly failed to do anything about fraud in the European context. The Opposition spokesman, the hon. Member for Windsor (Mr. Trend), shakes his head, but he should look at the documents that European Standing Committee B studied. If anything, Conservative plans were to take budgetary lines out of and resources away from the auditing functions of the European Commission, not to beef them up or add to them.

Now, the Conservatives come a little late in the day to being allegedly concerned about fraud. Indeed, only the other day—perhaps the hon. Member for Vale of York (Miss McIntosh) can tell us whether she was a party to this—Tory MEPs voted against a recent member statute that meant that MEPs, perish the thought, had to provide proof of expenses before claiming any money. Perhaps, after some thought, the hon. Lady will tell us whether she voted against such a radical move towards accountability in the European Parliament. I see that she has thought already.

Miss McIntosh: Perhaps this would be a good moment to ask the hon. Gentleman to ask his right hon. Friend the Minister of State, who is to reply to the debate, why this country welcomed the fact that a 40 per cent. income tax is to be imposed on MEPs, but there is to be a five-year contributions gap. That seems to be in line with taxing people on a contributory basis and then giving them a five-year contributions holiday.

Mr. McNulty: I was tempted to ask the hon. Lady to give way, but then remembered that I was on my feet. People from Yorkshire down to Essex will note with interest that the hon. Lady, who represents Essex in the European Parliament I believe, failed to answer where she stood on the thorny issue of MEP's expenses. That is fair enough—perhaps she will have a chance to do so later.

Mr. MacShane: We have an hour and a half.

Mr. McNulty: She may get there in the end.

The manifesto states:

"Conservative MEPs are determined to fight fraud and maladministration in Europe."

We will wait and see. They have had the best part of 20 years to do so and have done precious little, so why should we or the people of this country start to believe them now?

The manifesto continues:

"Conservative MEPs will oppose Euro-Socialist efforts to impose new burdens on business, new Euro-taxes, new trade-union privileges and new red tape."

Let us explore that commitment further. When challenged in Department of Trade and Industry or Foreign Affairs Select Committees, red tape often seems to mean health and safety and a range of other provisions that any normal sensible and good employer would want to provide anyway. That commitment is code for opposing much that is in the social chapter. Why do the Conservatives not say so? It is code for opposing any number of aspects of the social chapter that people in this country like.

The manifesto goes on:

"Conservative MEPs will vote for the completion of the single market, to secure greater competition and wider consumer choice at lower prices."

It is not for me to remind people of recent coverage in the press in the past year or two, and before that, which states that the variation and disparity in prices is between

[Mr. McNulty]

the European mainland and Britain. What did the Conservatives do in 18 years in power to remove that disequilibrium in consumer choice and prices? Absolutely nothing. Therefore, why should the people of Britain start to believe them now in any context?

Then we are told:

"Conservative MEPs will push for effective action to make it easier for British citizens to trade, travel, study, work and live throughout the EU."

I do not know why they do not add motherhood and apple pie to that list—everyone has signed up to that commitment. This is a new bold initiative from Conservative MEPs—I do not think so.

Finally, the Conservatives say among other things that their MEPs

"will work for proper environmental and consumer safeguards".

Why should we believe that? They have done nothing about it for the past 20 years either in government or as a feeble Opposition.

The best laugh is that:

"Conservative MEPs will defend Britain's farmers and fishermen to ensure they get the best possible deal in Europe."

Where have they been for the past 18 years? What did they do for the interests of fishermen or farmers in Britain—precious and absolutely little. Now, returning to their fluffy little words, they say:

"Conservative MEPs will use the European Parliament's powers to advance Conservative principles"—

a contradiction in terms surely—

"and resist Socialism in Europe."

I am happy to say that this document is replete with errors and contradictions. It is abject nonsense from start to finish, and bears no comparison with reality, or the reality of the Conservatives' record in government. Two years later, why should anyone take any notice of them?

The right hon. and learned Member for Folkestone and Hythe made some cursory introductory remarks about Kosovo. I felt like intervening then, but it would be nice finally to nail the lie, if indeed it is a lie, that the Conservatives have not yet paid back the £18,000 that they got from Slobodan Milosevic's front companies in the run-up to the general election. If they have paid it back, fine, let them say so. If they have not, everything that they say about Kosovo or against Milosevic must be seen in that context. That is a fair point. If the Tory party, or at least those who have captured its soul, if indeed it has one—a malevolent, nasty group of xenophobic throwbacks and malcontents—were honest about their manifesto, it would be called "Not in Europe" or "Europe not on your Life, Guv" instead of "In Europe, not run by Europe". That latest pithy phrase is all that the right hon. Member for Richmond, Yorks (Mr. Hague) could come up with to try to hold his silly little party together. The Tories are all over the place on Europe and their cop-out on the euro has happily rendered them completely irrelevant to the future of this country. Long may they remain so.

8.30 pm

Mr. Tim Loughton (East Worthing and Shoreham): As always, it is a dubious pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Harrow, East (Mr. McNulty). It is intriguing that in the entire 23 minutes of his manic rant he mentioned almost nothing about the Government's policy on Europe or the European Union, which is the title of the debate. It was all about his weird interpretation of the Conservative party manifesto on Europe. As we heard earlier, it is the Conservative party manifesto because we have our own manifesto on Europe, not one that we had to sign jointly with 20 other supposed partner parties in European socialism.

A debate on Europe in Government time is a rare beast these days. It took a Conservative Opposition day debate a couple of weeks ago to bring up European fraud. It took a Liberal Democrat Member's Adjournment debate some months ago to discuss the changeover plan. That was so important an announcement that the Prime Minister came to the House and regaled us with the luxury of all of 67 minutes of statement and questions when it is conceivably the most important sovereignty matter to face the House in a generation. Constant Conservative questioning on the withholding tax is still seeking a statement from a Treasury Minister. It is always interesting that Labour Members avoid the word that dare not speak its name, sovereignty. Any Conservative Member concerned about the dilution of British sovereignty in key areas is cast aside as a ranting little Englander, and no debate ensues.

Mr. John Cryer: The hon. Gentleman talks about probing the Executive on European issues. Neither of us was here then, but does he remember that in 1992, shortly after Maastricht, the Conservative Government got a bit jittery about the questions being asked about the treaty, kicked it upstairs and removed the time specifically allotted every fortnight for questions on the European Union? What does he think of that?

Mr. Loughton: The hon. Gentleman must admit that in those days we had much more debate on the subjects at the heart of Europe. The Maastricht treaty will affect us for years to come. The press and Members' questions were full of nothing but the treaty. However curtailed debating time was, it was considerably more than the few hours that we have had in the two years under new Labour.

This is a key time in our relations with Europe. The elections on 10 June will result in a new Parliament with many more powers than its predecessors had, thanks to the treaty of Amsterdam. It will have powers of co-decision in 38 areas of legislation where previously it was limited to 15. They include employment, social policy, health, transport, consumer protection and free movement of workers. There are powers to demand accountability from the European Commission and in respect of various other activities of the EU. That has been lacking in the past.

All this is happening in the context of an election that is probably doomed to the participation of only a third of the British electorate. That electorate will be exceedingly confused when they come out of the polling stations. They will resent not being able to vote—for most people, and for the first time in British election history—for a candidate of the elector's choice. It is only the Conservative party that is holding a debate on Europe, although I fear that too much of it is held in public. However, the real issues relating to Europe are being debated by the Conservatives; they are being completely skirted by the Government.

Labour party political broadcasts for the European elections are wholly free of European content. We see scenes of schools in the United Kingdom; the new deal is mentioned and we hear about pensioners and eyesight. We see nothing about European policies and the role of the Labour Government in Europe—there is a little bit tagged on at the end of the broadcast to remind people that it is a European election and not merely another homily on the fact that the Prime Minister can walk on water.

As we have heard so many times, the Labour party could not come up with its own manifesto for the European elections; it had to join in with the manifesto of the European socialists. We hear that the Prime Minister has rejected calls for a televised debate on the subject of Europe. Such a debate would ensure that more people in this country were enlightened as to the real issues.

There are two main fundamental issues, of which the first is sovereignty. There is an attack on the authority of this place through some of the measures that the Government are considering in their shared manifesto. The second issue relates to the inevitability argument—that the political and economic integration that we are seeing under this Government are all about softening up the British public to accept entry to the euro as inevitable.

To go back to basics, there are three roles of Government. The first role is to tax their subjects; the second is to defend their subjects in time of war; and the third is to administer justice and maintain the rule of law in this country.

Mr. Win Griffiths (Bridgend): The hon. Gentleman has put them in the wrong order.

Mr. Loughton: They may be in any order that Labour Members choose; there is no order of preference. However, I shall deal with the last role first. Corpus juris is a phrase that has hit the headlines in recent months as the embryo of a future European criminal code. As the UK is one of the few countries in the EU to use the adversarial system—almost alone against the inquisitorial system elsewhere—it is clear which system will be the winner, despite the fact that our system has served this country well over many centuries of English law.

In relation to the right and the role of Government to defend subjects in time of war, we hear more and more about a common European defence policy. A country can wage war only by taxing its subjects in order to raise revenue to fund that war. That relates to the first of the issues that I raised: the subject of tax. Perhaps it is fitting that, as we speak, the ECOFIN meeting in Brussels is under way, discussing the future of European taxes—not least the withholding tax. If it goes through, that tax will be especially lethal to thousands of jobs in the City and will cost billions to the balance of payments of this country's trade.

During the past few days, news has leaked out—without an announcement to the House, as so often happens—that the code of conduct group, chaired by none other than the Paymaster General, is considering no fewer than 185 different tax rates and rates of so-called harmful tax competition. "Harmful tax competition" is a well worn phrase—it probably contains the greatest paradox of all. To my mind, tax competition can be nothing but beneficial, but we have been spoon-fed that phrase about harmful tax competition from all angles. Apparently, the code of conduct group is considering whether the tax breaks for small businesses in Northern Ireland will have to go, even though those tax breaks were only introduced in the Finance Act 1998—on whose Standing Committee I served. The group is also considering the scrapping of enterprise zones for depressed areas.

It is perhaps ironic that today, when the Standing Committee on the Finance Bill is discussing the tax treatment of British industry, the Paymaster General is apparently discussing the eradication of tax breaks for that industry. The Paymaster General must be holding some interesting conversations with herself. She has one hat on when she is in the Committee Room discussing the Finance Bill and preparing to abolish a measure that the Government introduced last year. She wears another hat as chairman of the code of conduct group, saying that the tax break is completely unfair and that we shall of course go along with banning it. I hope that she will not resort to the usual tactic of saying different things in different places to different audiences. Has the House been kept informed of any proposals of the secret committee, which is chaired by a Minister, that will inevitably dilute the House's authority to set the taxes that it thinks appropriate for our subjects, to whom we are all accountable?

Mr. Griffiths: Yes.

Mr. Loughton: The answer is no. It is no good Labour Members disagreeing: a list of the taxes and reliefs under consideration has never been released, despite constant parliamentary questions from this side of the House. Despite oral questions at Question Time, the Paymaster General refuses to describe what is on that list. Apart from the handful of measures that I have described, the list has never been released. It will affect the powers and privileges of the House to set taxes and to grant tax relief to our subjects, yet we—the legislators of this country—are not privy to that information. It will be discussed first with Finance Ministers of other countries behind closed doors in smoke-filled rooms. The first we will hear about it is through a leak, on the internet, or via a statement from the German Finance Minister, as occurred this evening.

Have we had any statement from the Government? Of course not. The Government have refused to publish the list or to give any details about the timetable to which the code of conduct group is working. We are left to guess the details. Yet those decisions represent the biggest transfer of sovereignty from the House that we have ever seen—and all in the name of ending the paradox of harmful tax competition.

I was at Mansion house a couple of weeks ago when the sacked-but-still-at-his-desk Commissioner Mario Monti gave a speech to the City of London. He made it clear that the withholding tax will be levied and that, if the Government do not get their act together and compromise, it will be much to the detriment of all concerned. The Commissioner offered very little hope to the eurobond business in the City of London, and all hon. Members know what will happen. If we have a withholding tax, the business of eurobond trading in the City of London will go overnight to Zurich and back to the United States, whence much of it came in the 1980s. That is a prime example of cutting off our nose to spite our face.

The Government publication "Developments in the European Union" refers to the taxing of savings. It claims that the withholding tax project is being discussed in order

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to eliminate evasion of tax on cross-border payments of interest to individuals in the EU. Yet the measure will affect people who live outside the EU. At a stroke, they will take their business to other financial markets in other parts of the world—namely, Switzerland and the United States. Apparently, we are going to let that happen.

Today's ECOFIN meeting in Brussels provided an ideal opportunity for Treasury Ministers to stop talking tough and start acting tough. Just 12 days ago, the Chancellor said at Treasury questions:

"I have made it absolutely clear that the United Kingdom will not accept any directive that requires member states to introduce a withholding tax. It has been absolutely clear for months."—[*Official Report*, 13 May 1999; Vol. 331, c. 405.]

For once, I agree with the Chancellor: it cannot be clearer than that. On 26 January, the Economic Secretary to the Treasury said:

"We will not agree to any directive that applies to eurobonds. We will continue to defend the interests of the City of London and we will not accept any proposals which might damage it."

She said that the Government were prepared to use their veto to block the "disastrous" withholding tax. The Paymaster General—who was not busy chairing the code of conduct group at the time—said:

"We have made it absolutely clear"—

there is clarity all over the place—

"that we will not agree to any course of action which would seriously damage the UK and other European financial markets."

Today was the day for the Government to cash in on the respect that the Foreign Secretary opened the debate by claiming the Government had built up in bucketfuls with our partners in the other capitals of Europe. Today was the day for the Foreign Secretary and his Treasury colleagues at the ECOFIN meeting to tell their European partners that we will not accept withholding tax. Today was the day to wake up those European colleagues and tell them that introducing a withholding tax, which some years ago destroyed the bond market in the US overnight and which failed dismally in Germany when it was introduced in 1987, is against the interests not only of the City of London but of [illegible]he financial markets in the European Union.

Failing the Foreign Secretary's ability to cash in on that respect or to persuade his European colleagues of his argument, today was the day to use the British veto. It is late in the day for that. The ghastly concept of a withholding tax should have been strangled at birth, as all Conservative Members realised when it first reared its ugly head. The Government have only themselves to blame for getting to this pretty pass today, because they should have stamped on the withholding tax many months ago when they first had the opportunity to do so. However, they wanted to appear to be good Europeans who go along with their EU partners, so they singularly failed to stamp on it.

The Government failed dismally again today, because the result of the ECOFIN meeting is that a compromise will be put on the table. The last rites on withholding tax and the eurobond market will conveniently be delayed until after the European elections, so as to minimise the impact on the Government and their policy on Europe. The Chancellor will write a technical note about the withholding tax. He had two years to write all manner of technical notes. We all know what will happen in a few weeks—there will be a fudged compromise, and that will be the end of the eurobond market in the City of London.

The City does not believe that any fudged compromise to exempt the wholesale bond market, such as the one discussed at ECOFIN today, will prove at all workable. The director general of the London Investment Banking Association recently said:

"A plan to ameliorate a proposal which is clearly unsatisfactory will not work."

Such a proposal would trigger a two-tier market of new and old bonds and early redemption clauses and would not work. The eurobond market—which is worth $3 trillion a year in London alone, with some 11,000 jobs relying on it—would leave London and the European Union overnight, much to everybody's detriment.

It is no surprise that, tonight, Swiss financiers are metaphorically licking their lips in eager anticipation. For the past few months, they have been busy installing new trading systems for dealing in eurobonds denominated in euros which are fully compatible with all EU country needs. The Swiss Economic Affairs Minister recently said that the Swiss were looking to the capital flight out of euroland which will be caused by the introduction of a withholding tax. They have already targeted 10 per cent. of the European equity market for the end of this year, and they are preparing to abolish stamp duty to make that flight even more rapid.

It is as if the City of London financial markets are to be punished for the British people's reluctance to accept at face value the Prime Minister's mantra, "The euro is good for you." They are to be punished also because the City is proving that there is life outside the euro, and a profitable one at that. Despite Government claims that the City needs to be part of a euro financial community, the opposite is proving true. We still have nearly 600 foreign banks—a record number—operating in the City of London. Some 600,000 people work in the financial community in the City, which is more than the entire population of Frankfurt.

Americans have not been scared off by our failure to enter the euro yet. The Japanese and the Germans have not been scared off. Let us consider some of the participants in the City of London. Merrill Lynch, one of the largest American banks in the world, has 5,000 staff in the City and has just spent £200 million on a new European headquarters. Where is that headquarters? It is in London. Where has another large American bank, JP Morgan, based 3,800 of its total European staff of 4,500? In London. Salomon Brothers has 1,800 of its 2,000 European staff based in London, and recently claimed:

"We have no plans to change that balance because of the arrival of the Euro. If anything, more of our business will be consolidating in London."

The Germans agree—the managing director of Dresdner bank, which now owns Kleinwort, said:

"London will retain its outstanding importance, even if Great Britain does not join monetary union."

Similarly, the Japanese—Sanwa, one of Japan's largest banks, is closing its Paris offices and branches to consolidate European business in London. Its spokesman said:

"We need London but we do not need both Paris and Frankfurt."

From the implications of what happened today, it seems that the City and the thousands dependent on it in the financial services industry and beyond are to be punished by a Government desperate to prove themselves good Europeans, above all else.

The surrender of the withholding tax is just the tip of the iceberg. We have 300 other taxes and tax reliefs, which could now be up for grabs and which lie at the mercy of European Finance Ministers who take exception to the competitive advantage of so many low tax rates and pragmatic reliefs, many of which were built up over 18 successful years of Conservative economic rule. All are now under attack from the Government's taxing by stealth and after today are equally under attack from levelling up to continental rates—except in the case of British lorry drivers, on whose behalf our Finance Ministers see no reason to bat.

The British public are not stupid. They are waking up to the precedents being set in the harmonisation of tax rates and relief. They are wising up to the effect that that will have on stamp duty, corporation taxes, social and employment taxes, taxes on savings, the rates and scopes of VAT, and ultimately the effect on income tax, one of the most powerful tools for raising revenue available to the House.

The Government are desperately trying to wear down the public for the next and crucial phase in European integration—British entry into the euro. We all know that opinion polls consistently show that the British public are not in favour of joining the euro. It is an interesting paradox that many of the same opinion polls reveal that most British people think that going into the euro is inevitable.

Phrases such as "In a common market a common currency is common sense" are touted by the marketing gurus behind the Labour party and shot at us. The former Economic Secretary to the Treasury, now the Minister for Transport, said a little while ago that in a few years, when the German tourist is on his sun-lounger next to the British tourist on his sun-lounger buying a beer on a Spanish beach, and the German tourist pays with his euros, while the British tourist has to convert his currency into euros before he can pay, British people will wake up to the fact that joining the euro is a sensible course of action. However, that German tourist may not be able to afford to be on the beach buying a beer, because of what has happened to the combined European economies. Those are the real issues, which the Government try to skirt around.

We recently saw the Government trying to wear down the resistance of the British public by going ahead with the changeover plan after only 67 minutes of explanation from the Prime Minister. British business and its shareholders will have to pay up billions. British taxpayers, through the Government, will have to pay up billions to prepare for our entry into the euro currency, which on the balance of probabilities, if it still depends on the outcome of a referendum, will not happen. The Government are selling off our gold reserves to reinvest in euros and to pool our reserves with the euro by stealth, to make it inevitable.

None of that has anything to do with considerations of sovereignty. The Government are surreptitiously resorting to the inevitability of gradualism. The real issue of sovereignty has been completely avoided in any contribution that I have heard today from the Government Benches. The issue that needs to be countered is that of inevitability. That is the Government's only chance of gaining credibility for our entry into the euro.

Nothing is inevitable, except death and taxes—and also, perhaps, the capacity of the hon. Member for Harrow, East (Mr. McNulty) to alienate everyone around him after a 27-minute rant. The Government do not want to discuss the real issues in Europe. They go to great lengths to avoid debating the real issues affecting the British people.

As with so much, new Labour resents the process of scrutiny and accountability which is the modus vivendi of this place. The Foreign Secretary referred to our attempts to scrutinise the Government on their plans for harmonisation of taxes, and we have scrutinised them in respect of the increased social costs, red tape and regulation involved in Europe. Labour Members say that all that scrutinising, which is the role of the Opposition in the House, is down to fear of Europe. What a pretty pass that is, and on 10 June we shall see whom the British people fear most.

8.55 pm

Mr. John Smith (Vale of Glamorgan): I welcome the opportunity to contribute to this important debate on the European Union in the run-up to the Cologne Council and the European elections, which will take place on 10 June. Although the hour is late, a number of hon. Members want to speak, so I shall keep my comments as brief as I can and focus on one area that has perhaps not been covered enough—the clear economic advantages to this country of membership of the European Union.

I have to admit that I was no great enthusiast when we first considered whether to enter the Common Market over 20 years ago. At that time, less than 20 per cent. of this country's income from foreign trade came from trade with the rest of Europe. However, 25 years later, Opposition Members are adopting an unbelievable position—this country depends on the European Union for nearly two thirds of its income from foreign trade. They argue against greater co-operation and against constructive engagement. They rule out a single currency for a fixed period—for decades, or whatever it is—which is absolutely ludicrous. Small wonder that this country's business community has no support for them whatever.

The party that once claimed to be the party of business has become a joke in the business community in Britain as a whole and particularly in the business community in south Wales, which is my part of the world. Tory Members of Parliament were wiped off the map at the previous election because of their completely unrealistic views on Europe. If they do not get their act together, stop squabbling and pull together a coherent economic policy on Europe, they will stay in the wilderness indefinitely.

The advantages of membership of the European Union are considerable. When I was briefly not a Member of the House, I worked in the inward investment business in Wales and I can tell hon. Members, if they do not already know, that the European Union is one of the most attractive—if not the most attractive—investment locations in the world. We sometimes forget that the European Union has 380 million of the most sophisticated consumers in the world consuming sophisticated goods and services at a higher rate of value than any other market in the world. It is the biggest consumer market

[Mr. John Smith]

by value, if not by volume, of consumption. That is the attraction of the European Union, that is why there are huge economic advantages in continuing to work closely with the rest of Europe and that is why the only policy that this or any Government can adopt is pragmatism towards Europe.

In south Wales, our economy has been transformed over 20 years. It was dominated by heavy industries, primarily coal and steel, which produced almost exclusively for domestic consumption, but 80 per cent. of the manufacturing industry in south Wales now produces goods for direct export to the European consumer market. That is why our business people want a Government who will continue to engage in it.

However, we should draw the attention of my right hon. Friend the Minister to a feature of that hugely attractive and economically seductive marketplace. It is structured unevenly and two thirds of all consumption in the economic union takes place in only 10 per cent. of the territory.

The wealth of the European Union is very concentrated. The highest rates of GDP per capita are in an area running through central Europe with which we are all familiar. We jump into our cars and drive down to the south of France using that route. I am talking about the south-eastern corner of Wales, the south of England, Paris, northern France, southern Belgium, southern Germany and the Turin-Milan axis. That is where most of the economic activity takes place, and that is why we have the structural funds that we have, and will continue to have for some time. We want to help to redress the balance.

I am delighted that Wales secured £1.3 billion in objective 1 funding for mid-Wales and the valleys, which have suffered particularly over the past 20 years. During that period, our GDP per capita relative to that of the rest of the UK, and the rest of the EU, has fallen, and the gap between Wales and the south of England—and between Wales and the rest of Europe—has widened. That must be dealt with in the EU.

My hon. Friend the Member for Doncaster, Central (Ms Winterton) described eloquently the advantageous impact that European funding could have on people, and I do not think that we can take that away. The right hon. Member for Charnwood (Mr. Dorrell) made a shameful contribution, dismissing structural funds as a return to the old-fashioned policies of the 1960s and 1970s. What nonsense! Anyone who has observed the successful way in which Ireland, for example, has used its structural funds will know that they can turn an economy around.

The secret lies in meeting the challenges, and ensuring that the funds are invested innovatively. They should be invested not simply to deal with people's needs, but to create an environment that will allow our regional economies to grow, develop and prosper throughout Europe. That challenge faces the entire United Kingdom. Over the past 20 years, not just Wales, but the north-west, the north-east, parts of Yorkshire and, certainly, Merseyside have been badly affected by the relative decline in wealth creation.

I am a great fan of the creation of the regional development agencies, which took place on 1 April this year. I think that they will go a long way towards helping us to disperse wealth creation more evenly—not to take wealth from one part of the country and give it to another, but to ensure that the regions start to grow more quickly and evenly as we prosper as members of the EU. People not only in the whole of this country, but in the whole of Europe will be able to benefit from that.

Nevertheless, the creation of the regional development agencies also presents a huge challenge to Wales in particular. Along with Scotland, over the past 20 years, we have been lucky in having a competitive edge. The Welsh Development Agency has helped us to attract investment, especially foreign investment. During those past two decades, we have had a good record in regard to the attraction of investment to Wales, and the jobs that go with it. Now we shall have regional development agencies throughout the United Kingdom, notably the London development agency, which will be created next year. That will make it much easier for the UK to compete for the existing capital in the EU, and to secure it for its own regions.

It is vital that we invest objective 1 money so that our economies can grow in a sensible way. As I said earlier, the south-eastern corner of Wales is at the core of the consumer market in the EU, which is what makes it such an attractive investment location. Whatever strategy is adopted in Wales—through the House, or through the newly created Welsh Assembly—we must retain the advantage of an attractive investment location that can offer competitive prices, direct access to the marketplace and a good quality of life for those who live in the area. Objective 1 expenditure must complement the development of the area, so that the whole of Wales can benefit. We must take a strategic approach to ensure that we expand the whole economy of Wales.

That point brings me on to objective 2, which is another crucial area of structural funding. We have already quite rightly allocated objective 1 money in Wales to the less-favoured areas, and that is where it should go. It is critical that any objective 2 funding that comes to the Principality is spent just as wisely. We must take into account two considerations.

First, we must examine indices of social and economic deprivation in other parts of Wales. My constituency is a good example. As a whole, it looks like one of the most prosperous constituencies in Wales in terms of income per household, but some areas, such as north-east and southern Barry, and particularly the coastal strip, experience enormous and unbelievable deprivation. The last recorded statistics—the figures are a little dated, but they still reveal the level of deprivation—showed that the average household income, including gross income apart from housing benefits, was less than £60 per week per household. One has to think about that to appreciate the level of deprivation that that implies. Those areas should automatically be considered for objective 2 status merely on the basis of social deprivation.

More importantly, we must also consider the value of such investment for regenerating the economies of south-east Wales as well as the less-favoured areas. The whole coastal strip—Barry, the port of Cardiff and the port of Newport—contains a cluster of areas that suffer deprivation. Investment in major infrastructural programmes through objective 2 funding would benefit not only the industrial south-east, but the whole of Wales. However, that money must be allocated and spent properly.

Three major projects could make an enormous difference: the M4 relief road in south Wales to accommodate the increase in traffic that is bound to happen with continuing economic growth; the electrification of the main rail link to south Wales; and the dualling of the access road to Wales's only international airport. Access to that airport is a crucial future business link. Those projects would ensure that we relieved poverty and deprivation, and that we created jobs and a stable environmental and economic framework for future growth and prosperity in the area.

Objective 2 funding is vital, especially in light of the fact that we now have regional development agencies throughout the United Kingdom. The Minister and her colleagues must address the problem of the structural imbalance in economic growth throughout Europe, and ensure that it is more evenly spread. When the time comes to allocate crucial objective 2 structural funding—I know that it is not her responsibility, but I am sure that she has a dialogue with her colleagues—those two criteria should be met. Ministers must relieve deprivation and ensure that the funding goes into innovative projects that will facilitate future economic growth in south Wales.

I have no doubt that, if we adopt that strategy, my constituency and the region of south Wales, like many other outlying regions of the United Kingdom, can look forward to prosperity and continued growth for some time to come.

9.9 pm

Miss Anne McIntosh (Vale of York): I am grateful to be called to participate in the debate, especially following the speech of the hon. Member for Vale of Glamorgan (Mr. Smith), who is such an eloquent advocate for his area. I am sure that there will be a lot in common between the two Vales.

The mood was set by the Foreign Secretary—a rather sombre tone against the background of the hostilities in Kosovo. I associate myself with the eloquent remarks of my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Folkestone and Hythe (Mr. Howard), the shadow Foreign Secretary.

I should like to say a few words about the state of agriculture and the missed opportunity at the Cologne summit to build on the agreement that was concluded in Berlin in March on reform of the common agricultural policy and of structural funds. An opportunity has been missed to go over the regrettable failure of farm Ministers to reach agreement.

In particular, I note that milk quotas will put great pressure on dairy prices in England, Scotland and Wales following an agreement that is favourable to Northern Ireland. I do not begrudge Northern Irish Members that, but it will put great pressure on other agricultural areas in the United Kingdom such as the Vale of York, and further depress milk prices.

The Berlin summit left the beef sector broadly unchanged as well, and failed to take the opportunity to run with rural development policy and environment policy. In the arable sector, intervention prices were reduced only by 15 per cent. in two years, not the 20 per cent. that was first sought.

It is important to put on record the fact that, as my right hon. Friend the Member for Fylde (Mr. Jack) has said, the Agenda 2000 reforms will not meet our obligations under the World Trade Organisation. That is regrettable.

I know that pig farmers and producers of other products in the Vale of York feel particularly aggrieved that there is no support for pork products, either from the Government or from the Commission, when the sector is undergoing probably its greatest ever crisis throughout the European Union. As we have so many pig producers in the Vale of York, they are especially damaged.

I am disappointed that the hon. Member for Harrow, East (Mr. McNulty) is no longer in his place and that he failed to take account of the fact that, in 18 years in government, the Conservative party tried to create fair competition in agriculture, not least in animal welfare. It is regrettable that, having banned sow stalls and tethers in this country, we have imposed an additional unilateral burden on our farmers, which no other producers—whether in Denmark, Holland or other countries in the European Union—will have to meet.

Farmers in the Vale of York are one of the largest employers; although, individually, they do not employ many people, they are a large employer overall. They have had certain expectations from the Government, who have disappointed them. The Cologne summit was an opportunity for those expectations to have been revived and satisfied.

It is fair to say that the business community has different expectations of the Government in relation to the European Union. Its expectations have been disappointed as well. As time is short, I take just one specific example. This week, we heard that we were going to have record delays in air traffic this summer. That will affect not just travellers, but, equally important, members of the business community who go out there to seek orders for UK plc. I regret that the Government have not used the opportunity of the Cologne summit—perhaps they still might—to put pressure on Eurocontrol once and for all to achieve a single air traffic control unit.

I do not think that we need to cede any more sovereignty to the Commission; it is not the right body to achieve that. However, if the Government could use their offices to put pressure on member states that have failed to invest the same amount in air traffic control equipment as this country has—under the previous Government, we were a flagship in that regard—it would be helpful in satisfying business customers that they will be able to travel to reach their orders throughout the European Union. Patently, they are not going to do so this summer.

The Government have placed great emphasis on social Europe, calling for a working time directive and a minimum wage. Conservative Members should like flexible labour markets to be established. We therefore oppose the working time directive and the minimum wage, which will not promote the flexible labour market that we want.

The working time directive will apply to everyone—unless one is a junior hospital doctor. I regret that that sole exemption will continue, for possibly up to 13 years, as it does not send a very good message to our very hard-pressed junior hospital doctors. Perhaps the Minister will be able today to give us a good reason why the exemption should continue.

In an earlier intervention—which the hon. Member for Doncaster, Central (Ms Winterton) kindly allowed me to make—I mentioned pig farmers. In North Yorkshire, we are concerned that pig farmers, and other farmers, will be the 1990s equivalent of the coal miners in the 1980s.

[Miss Anne McIntosh]

I therefore make a plea to Ministers to ensure that, when they consider structural funds, Agenda 2000 and the additional role that will be played by national Governments, and indeed by regional development agencies, the Vale of York and other areas in North Yorkshire will continue to benefit from Konver and 5(b).

In the past, under the previous Conservative Government, it was recognised that rural areas did quite well. We want to ensure that the current Government maintain the balance between rural and urban areas. There will, therefore, be a contest between Doncaster, Central and the Vale of York. Although I am sure that the Vale of York will come out on top in such a contest, I simply ask the Minister to ensure that areas that have benefited in the past will continue to do so.

Young people look to the European Union as a continent of opportunities, and perhaps as a place where they may be able to use their languages. The House may not know it, but I am a Rentokil scholar. Rentokil is a Danish-owned company, and I gained a six-month scholarship to study at the university of Aarhus. Now, partly on the basis of that six-month scholarship from Rentokil, I am in there—in the House of Commons—fighting for Yorkshire. I hope that young people will not be disappointed in their expectations—dragged down because of burdensome, interventionist policies, such as the working time directive and the minimum wage—but will be able to avail themselves of that continent of opportunities.

I also hope that the Cologne summit will make progress on some issues, thereby giving us a little taste or soupcon of next year's intergovernmental conference. Opposition Members are committed to enlarging the European Union, and particularly to bringing in central and eastern European countries. We want the EU to have a wider and broader membership in order to enlarge the marketplace.

I hope that the Government and our European partners will not shirk from making the tough decisions that must be made. Tough decisions on institutional arrangements must be made, such as on the number of Commissioners and—dare I say it—even on the number of Members of the European Parliament and other institutions. The Amsterdam treaty negotiations did not face up to making those decisions, but they will have to be taken either this year, at Cologne, or at next year's intergovernmental conference.

Cologne will be the threshold of decision making for the millennium and will set Europe's future direction. Just as Cologne will be a threshold for Europe, I am approaching a threshold in my own career. At the European elections, and after serving for 10 years in the European Parliament, I shall retire—being a very retiring Member of Parliament—from the European Parliament, and devote myself entirely to my constituents in the Vale of York, who I hope will receive a piece of good news in the Minister's reply to the debate.

9.20 pm

Mrs. Louise Ellman (Liverpool, Riverside): I welcome this evening's wide-ranging debate just as I welcome the Government's positive attitude to our participation in the European Union for the benefit of people in the United Kingdom. It is in marked contrast to the negative attitude adopted previously, when local authorities such as Lancashire county council and other regional groups had to open their own offices in Brussels so that the people of our regions could have their interests represented.

I deplore the continuing negative stance of Conservative Members this evening. Indeed, the speech of the right hon. Member for Charnwood (Mr. Dorrell) should ring warning bells among the electorate as we approach the European elections. His denunciation of the European structural funds should be a warning to the electorate in the English regions. Critical aspects of objective 1 and objective 2 funding and other aspects of structural funding are still under negotiation. The right hon. Gentleman was saying clearly to the people of this country that if they elect Conservative MEPs, they will be supporting a point of view that is against the interests of the people of the regions at a time of critical negotiation.

It is clear from what has happened in recent years that structural funds have been highly effective in supporting regional economies. They are effective because they are targeted and linked with single-programme documents. Programmes have been worked out to meet the needs of the regions in which they operate. That is very clear in my constituency in the Merseyside objective 1 area, where £630 million of European funding has generated additional money leading to the investment of £1.5 billion in the Merseyside economy. That has resulted directly in 19,000 new jobs. It has produced a wide range of achievements including the regeneration of Queen's square. It has provided business support through the innovative Merseyside special investment fund which has led to the investment of £53.5 million in the Merseyside economy, supporting more than 260 businesses and 3,000 jobs. It has helped growing industries in the arts through support for organisations such as ACME—the Association of Cultural and Media Enterprises—and has supported infrastructure, which is essential for economic development. Projects have included the development of docks, railways and the airport. The investment has contributed to the development of skills for all ages throughout the population, and capacity building in local communities through the urban fund, for example, which has focused on areas of greatest deprivation.

I believe that the future success of European structural funds lies in the regional dimension. Britain has been very slow at recognising the importance of regions. In most of the rest of Europe, regional structures are well advanced and have helped to support their economies. Now, at long last, we have regional development agencies supported by regional chambers, which I hope will become directly elected regional assemblies.

Today, the Select Committee on the Environment, Transport and Regional Affairs, of which I am a member, published its second report on regional development agencies. The report stresses the importance of linking regional economic strategies developed in the regions of the United Kingdom with the use of European structural funding. One of its key recommendations is for regional development agencies to assume what is now the role of the regional Government offices in leading and co-ordinating European structural funds.

The report also recommends that the regional development agencies should assume the role of regional Government offices in leading skills training by contracting directly with the training and enterprise councils and business links. That would bring together

investment in our economy and the development of skills, linking that with European funds to enable the best use to be made of public and private resources. In looking at our regional economies, we must consider the importance of investing in business, investing in infrastructure and developing skills. We have to look at what we want in our regions, link that with European Union funding and put the funding sources together to have maximum impact in our economy.

That will be particularly important in the north-west. We need to develop a better transport system. We need to invest in freight and passenger rail services. We need to link up with trans-European fast routes. We need a fast rail link to the channel tunnel so that our economy can prosper. We need to support businesses and understand why the region has a low rate of business formation and survival. If we could increase that to the UK average, 100,000 additional jobs would be created and £4 billion would be added to our gross domestic product.

We need to support our growing tourism industry, which currently provides employment for 3,000 people in the north-west. We need to look at regional initiatives in the north-west, including developing trade with Ireland and with northern and central Europe. It means looking at the importance of diversifying our industries where they are vulnerable. It means developing the skills in our industry and our universities in a comprehensive way, embracing the information society so that skills and knowledge in our region can be applied to new circumstances to bring new jobs.

There is much more that this country can do to develop our regional policies. We need directly elected regional assemblies. We need to make regional interests more explicit at national level. We need to support regional representation in the reformed House of Lords through the regional chambers. We need to make it clear that we see regions as important not just for our economy, but for developing the interests of the people of this country, taking account of the views of all social partners in the regions.

Europe is far ahead of us in regional development. We are at a critical stage. We have our regional development agencies and regional chambers. We are developing our regional economies. We are to receive more significant funding from the European Union. It is time that we stopped being passive and thinking simply about how we can use the rest of Europe. We must become active participants at national and regional level. I hope that this debate contributes to moving us forward so that, as we develop our regional economies with all our social partners, we become fully part of the European Union—the Europe of the regions as well as the Europe of national Governments.

9.29 pm

Mr. Michael Trend (Windsor): The House looks forward with varying levels of enthusiasm to these six-monthly debates on the European Union that take place before the two major summits in the year. After the forthcoming Cologne summit, which will mark the end of the German presidency, we shall welcome the Finnish Government to the presidency, even though they are said to be increasingly anxious about inheriting a somewhat paralysed European Union.

Many important and interesting subjects have been raised today. The debate was ably opened for the Conservatives by my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Folkestone and Hythe (Mr. Howard), who made an important contribution on Kosovo. Many others also mentioned that subject, but if the House will forgive me I shall pass over it.

Our relationship with Russia was mentioned by several hon. Members, and that is an important issue at the moment. The hon. Members for Somerton and Frome (Mr. Heath) and for Ilford, South (Mr. Gapes) both asked difficult but important questions that the Government must consider. It would be interesting to hear the Government's views on the subject tonight.

Many other hon. Members made contributions relating to their areas. My right hon. Friend the Member for Charnwood (Mr. Dorrell) put the cat among the pigeons on that score, although I cannot decide whether it was a fat cat among pigeons, a cat among fat pigeons or a fat cat among fat pigeons. Anyway, we have heard much pleading for Members' constituencies or areas, and that is understandable although it also raises important and difficult questions.

Another theme ran through the debate tonight and that was accountability. Several hon. Members questioned, in different ways, the growing lack of accountability in many different aspects of the European Union and our relationship with it. That was brought out by my right hon. Friend the Member for Fylde (Mr. Jack), who made an excellent speech on agriculture. He wanted to reconsider how we scrutinise European legislation. My hon. Friend the Member for East Worthing and Shoreham (Mr. Loughton) was concerned about accountability to this House, and the hon. Member for Hornchurch (Mr. Cryer) told us that he had written to the European Parliament office in London in February asking some straightforward questions, to which there must be straightforward answers, and had not yet received a reply.

The current argument over Europe is first and foremost about the growing lack of accountability at all levels. In Cologne, the Council will deal with, among other things, how business is done in Europe. The Foreign Secretary has given us a list of the subjects that are likely to be discussed, which is helpful as far as it goes, but it does not go very far and does not give much detail. Ministers attend an endless stream of other important meetings, about which the House hears very little. Why is that? It is because there is no procedure in the House that obliges Ministers to explain what they are trying to do or to report the outcome of their efforts. As the Government increasingly do their business in Europe, it is vital to reconsider that issue. I heard what the Minister said earlier, but we need to look at our procedures.

It is the belief of the Opposition that Ministers should be required before any formal Council meeting—not just twice a year—to come before the House, put the Government's intended position and face questioning on a debatable motion, if necessary. Similarly, the process should apply after any Council at which Ministers have agreed any result differing from that which they sought to achieve. With the growing complexity of the United Kingdom's relationship with the European Union, there is a growing lack of accountability of Ministers to this House.

Many hon. Members mentioned the ECOFIN meeting today, including my hon. Friend the Member for East Worthing and Shoreham. We have seen one of the documents that emerged from that meeting, and the

[Mr. Michael Trend]

German president in office, Hans Eichel, has told us that there was a big step forward and that the meeting expressed a broad willingness to achieve a compromise. What was that compromise? It is important that the House should be able to question the Chancellor of the Exchequer on those points.

The usual mechanisms are failing to discover exactly what is going on. That may be due in part to the Government's natural reluctance to explain to anyone, even this House, what they are up to. So-called new Labour shares with old Labour one shining, central belief that they know better how to organise people's lives than individuals do themselves. The man in Whitehall still knows best and now so does his friend in Brussels.

What are we to make of the fiasco of the Commission? That question was also raised by the hon. Member for Hornchurch. The finest moment of the Commission came when it resigned. The events speak for themselves, but it is clear to Opposition Members that—under orders from national Governments at the turn of the year—the socialists in Strasbourg intended to prop up the Commission for its remaining months. They were told to fudge it. They reached for the traditional standby of those looking for delay and set up an inquiry, in the hope that the problem had been kicked into the long grass. However, the animal that they let off the leash was not a docile French poodle, but some sort of lurcher, which lurched its way through the Commission, carrying the Commissioners with it.

Months later, the Commission still finds it difficult to find the door marked exit. The national Governments say that they have been tough on the Commission, but the Commissioners are still all in place and on the payroll. Many hope to be reappointed.

Would a British Government, after losing a confidence vote in this House, be prepared to go away, lick their wounds and then slink back into office a few months later, having dropped only a few of their more unsavoury characters? No: it would have been a bag and baggage job. A British Government in that situation would have gone at the moment of resignation. [*Laughter.*]

Labour Members laugh, but they must know that people who resign from this House go the same day. They leave in disgrace and cannot make a personal statement to the House, but this is different because it is the European Union. The system has been designed by professional politicians for professional politicians, not for people at large.

This is new Europe. The Government promised us a new Europe two years ago, and that is what we are getting. This is modern, and hon. Members should not bother themselves with the details: all is being taken care of by Ministers. We have to get used to the idea that accountability and trust is a one-way street. Either we trust the Government and their European allies—or partners, as they call them—or we can lump it.

Other hon. Members spoke about the single currency. Conservative Members have given countless examples and quotations from senior European figures that show that the commonly held view on the continent is that the euro is a political project as well as an economic one. The new Commission President himself has said that economic and political union are two sides of the same coin. The matter could not be any clearer, but the Government—in the House and in their communications to the British public—say that the decision about joining the euro is purely a matter of economics.

No issue facing the country at the moment is greater than the question of whether we join the euro. No greater difference exists between the two major parties than the difference on this issue. Conservative Members relish the opportunity to make and win the case for retaining the ability of this House, which is democratically accountable to the British people, to determine our economic and political future.

What else have the Government to say about other policy areas affecting the development of the European Union over the next five years? On what programme or manifesto will new Labour go to the British people at the forthcoming European Parliament elections?

For the first time, as my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Folkestone and Hythe so ably pointed out, a political party in the United Kingdom has failed to put together its own manifesto for national elections. The Government have signed up lock, stock and barrel to the Euro socialist programme. That is a damning indictment of their approach. In contrast, the Conservative party has published a British manifesto, made in Britain, for Britain. We will be accountable to British voters.

I want to clear up a point that various Labour Members have brought up during the debate. The confusion was begun by the Foreign Secretary—I am sure in ignorance rather than mischief—and concerned the manifesto of the European People's party. The Foreign Secretary was wrong to say that the whip, Mr. Perry, had a hand in drafting that manifesto. He did not, and neither did any Conservative MEP. The positions of responsibility listed by the Foreign Secretary are in the EPP parliamentary group, not in the party itself. The party drew up the manifesto, and Conservative MEPs had no involvement.

I am sure that the Foreign Secretary did not mean to mislead the House on this matter. He should know that the European Democratic Union—a different organisation altogether—has put together a common position. We are able to sign up to that position, at the same time as producing our own manifesto for the British electorate.

The electorate can hold us accountable on what we advocate and do in Europe. That is not true of the Government. The first secretary of the French socialists has kindly pointed out that the socialist document for which the Labour party is campaigning commits Governments as well as MEPs. European socialists are devising policies that bind British Governments before the British people cast a single vote.

One subject should be at the top of the agenda at Cologne. Enlargement is unquestionably the most important subject facing the European Union. Several hon. Members have referred to it today, and we shall hear more warm words from the Minister about the matter being well in hand and progress being made. Those over-familiar phrases count for nothing in reality. While applicant countries are making progress, especially in legislative terms—an enormous amount of hard work is being done—all of them know that preparing for success is far from achieving it.

Politicians in those countries are increasingly worried that the EU may not let them in. The Berlin summit was billed as a great moment of reform that would enable

enlargement, but it turned out to be a big fix for the interests of the current Governments of member states. As my right hon. Friend the Member for Charnwood said, the Berlin summit effectively funked enlargement. Government Members cheerfully admit in private that the whole matter will have to be revisited before serious progress can be made on enlargement. As my hon. Friend the Member for Vale of York (Miss McIntosh) said, the common agricultural policy will have to be revisited very seriously.

This is not good enough. The Opposition see enlargement as a historic duty of the highest importance. What hopes and aspirations will the Poles, the Czechs and the Hungarians have at Cologne when the British Prime Minister seeks a formula by which to claim that he has preserved the British rebate? It is his proud boast, but is it true? Of course not. When it is pointed out that the Prime Minister has sold future rebate, he says that that is a different matter, and that he did it in any case to help enlargement. Round and round we go. Nonsense is piled on nonsense. He says one thing, and does another, as my hon. Friend the Member for Esher and Walton (Mr. Taylor) pointed out.

Ten years ago, I had the honour of standing for election to the European Parliament in the old London, North-East seat. At that time, that seat was not a Conservative heartland. The only safe Westminster seat was Chingford, and it still is. The then right hon. Member for Chingford was full of practical help and many kindnesses as a candidate. The House will be unsurprised to learn that I detected a certain lack of enthusiasm in him for the cause as a whole. I would have served happily in the European Parliament had I not been defeated by many tens of thousands of votes by Mr. Alf Lomas.

I want the European Union to work in the interests of all the people and nations of Europe. Much can be done, but we must break away from the historic architecture to build a better organisation for the future. To be critical of how Europe is going is not to be anti-European. To be in Europe, but not run by it is the aspiration of my party, of the British people and of peoples across the continent. UK voters need to feel that politicians are accountable in a much more immediate way than the structures of the European Union can hope to allow.

With the left in charge, Europe is following the wrong agenda. It is moving towards higher taxes, more regulation and deeper and dangerous integration. At Cologne, the Government should press for a Europe that is flexible, not rigid, a Europe that is diverse, not uniform; and a Europe that is outward-looking and not building an exclusive fortress. Only the Conservatives will work for a Europe that does less and does it better. Only we believe that Britain should be in Europe, not run by Europe.

9.44 pm

The Minister of State, Foreign and Commonwealth Office (Ms Joyce Quin): As is usual in these debates, a wide variety of issues have been raised. Unfortunately for me, a common thread throughout the speeches was that they nearly all contained specific points for me to deal with in my reply. As I have only 15 minutes to answer all those questions, it is not merely a Herculean but an impossible task. However, I can write to hon. Members if they feel that I have not covered certain matters.

There were many interesting speeches. Indeed, many of my hon. Friends spoke effectively and movingly about the importance of representing their constituents on European issues. That was clear from the speech of my hon. Friend the Member for Doncaster, Central (Ms Winterton), who mentioned the way in which Europe has helped and will be able to help in her area. Given that this debate is in the run-up to the European elections, it seemed entirely appropriate that hon. Members on both sides of the House should remind us of local and regional aspects of European policies. Certainly, my hon. Friends the Members for Vale of Glamorgan (Mr. Smith) and for Liverpool, Riverside (Mrs. Ellman) effectively referred to the situation in their areas, as did the hon. Member for Vale of York (Miss McIntosh).

I also commend the many speeches from both sides of the House that stressed the importance of an outward-looking European Union in various ways. It was important to stress, as did my hon. Friend the Member for Ilford, South (Mr. Gapes) and the right hon. Member for Fylde (Mr. Jack), the situation with regard to Russia and the importance of European engagement with Russia, which is why it has been identified as the subject of the first common strategy under the European Union's common foreign and security policy. I very much welcome that.

My hon. Friend the Member for Hornchurch (Mr. Cryer) mentioned the importance of developing countries. I hope that I will get an opportunity to pick up on one or two of the points that he made later, but he was right to bring developing countries into the debate on the European Union.

The hon. Member for Somerton and Frome (Mr. Heath) mentioned the middle east and the importance of ensuring that we do what we can to give the necessary momentum to the peace process, in particular in the light of the new Government in Israel.

My right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary spoke at some length on the situation in Kosovo and responded to many thoughtful and probing interventions. He gave examples, which moved us all, of the extent of the suffering and the appalling experiences that have been inflicted on whole families—men, women and children—by Milosevic's troops. He also looked to the future—rightly in my view—and mentioned the work that the European Union wants to do to help economic recovery and progress throughout that region in a way that can make all the countries concerned feel that they can move towards and into the European mainstream.

Our proposals will be considered at the Cologne European Council. We wholeheartedly endorse the presidency proposal for a south-east Europe stability pact, which could provide a unique and multilateral forum, involving all the countries of the region in due course, and could help to create a future partnership based on core democratic values.

The United Kingdom Government are also contributing ideas for action in other international forums, such as the Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe, NATO and the international financial institutions, to ensure that those various initiatives do not duplicate each other, but can complement each other and be effective, in that important task.

Various questions were put to my right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary. Although some may obviously be pursued with him directly, in answer to the shadow Foreign Secretary I can say that in NATO we are examining arrangements for an enhanced force to

[Ms Joyce Quin]

underwrite a ceasefire in Kosovo and to provide security for refugees to return. It is envisaged as a NATO force, under a NATO command structure, and will provide the core for an international military presentation in which we would welcome the participation of other partners. The sense of direction is clear.

The hon. Member for Somerton and Frome asked my right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary several specific questions about which I think that I can reassure him. There is no question of immunity for Milosevic and others, but those will be matters for the International War Crimes Tribunal. He also asked about territorial integrity. We are not advancing solutions based on partition, or partial or zonal arrangements of the sort that he mentioned.

I was pleased that my hon. Friend the Member for East Carmarthen and Dinefwr (Mr. Williams) paid tribute to the efforts of the Foreign Secretary, which have been remarkable before, during and after Rambouillet. It is a record of which the country, and certainly the Government, are proud.

On internal European Union policy issues, I thought that our debate was interrupted by a disgraceful intervention on a point of order by the shadow Chancellor. I had already explained to the House what happened in ECOFIN, but he was not present when I intervened. As he had intervened, I thought that I had better check my information. In a short absence from the Chamber, I checked with my Department and the Treasury but the situation was as I had described it to the House. What happened at ECOFIN was very advantageous to this country and to the Chancellor's work. He has managed to move the debate on to a recognition of the particular problems of the eurobond market and financial markets in a way that did not exist before. We should recognise and pay tribute to his achievements.

I think that the shadow Chancellor should come to the House to apologise for his intervention. While I have him in my sights, I want to deal with a claim that he made in last week's debate on fraud in the European Union. I am not sure why, but he claimed that I had been forced to admit that we had done little to tackle such fraud. I do not know where he got that from. I said no such thing and would happily defend to the House in detail our record on tackling fraud and financial irregularities, at both national and European level. In the early days of the Government, we managed to get into the Amsterdam treaty a legal base to combat fraud against the Community budget. I hope that it can be used now that the treaty has come into force.

In January, the Chancellor proposed that the head of UCLAF—Unité de Coordination de la Lutte Anti-Fraude—should be boosted to make him independent of the Commission, and I am glad that that independence has now been agreed. Some hon. Members on both sides of the House expressed concern about the office being within the European Commission, but I defend that strongly because I know well from the past it is when people have had access to the system, the files and the information, that fraud has been uncovered. The proposal ensures that the head of the unit is independent and does not owe his career or prospects to the European Commission. That independence is the key to tackling fraud effectively in the European Union.

Mr. Howard: Does not the right hon. Lady understand that it is possible for an independent body to have full access to all the documents and people that it needs while being outside the body that it is investigating? The Foreign Secretary gave no direct answer to the hon. Member for Falkirk, East (Mr. Connarty). Why will she not undertake to reconsider the proposal so that we can have an independent fraud investigating body outside the Commission?

Ms Quin: I have already answered the right hon. and learned Gentleman. We have agreed the best combination of independence and access to the information. That is what we believe is really important in tackling fraud. I am glad that that has now been agreed.

Many other points were raised and it will be difficult to cover them all in the course of my remarks. Although I enjoyed and appreciated many of the contributions that were made, I was somewhat depressed by the degree of inaccuracy in the speeches of many Opposition Members and by the repeated scare stories and assertions that have no foundation in reality. One Opposition Member said that it was a rarity for us to discuss European issues in the House. That is complete nonsense. Apart from the regular debates on progress in the European Union, statements are made and questions are answered after every European Council meeting. A variety of debates are held and evidence is given to Committees; only last week, my right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary gave lengthy evidence to the Select Committee on Foreign Affairs—quite rightly—on the prospects for Cologne. We have overhauled the European scrutiny arrangements in the House, which means that Members have a better opportunity to scrutinise European legislation than ever before. We are proud of our record in bringing such issues before Parliament. I should like Opposition Members to acknowledge that, rather than making constant wild allegations that we do not listen to them.

I struggled to find anything to agree with in the speech of the right hon. and learned Member for Folkestone and Hythe (Mr. Howard). I thought that I was going to agree with some of his comments about Kosovo when he said that we have a bipartisan approach—although his version of bipartisanship could most kindly be described as idiosyncratic. However, I agreed with him and his hon. Friend the Member for Windsor (Mr. Trend) about enlargement. Unfortunately, both of them gave a wholly inaccurate version of the Government's policy on enlargement. Instead of going slow, we are speeding up the enlargement process through our actions in the EU. I commend to them the speeches made by my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister in Romania and to Members of the Bulgarian Government, when he said that we would support an invitation to Romania and Bulgaria to open negotiations at the Helsinki summit. As the right hon. and learned Member for Folkestone and Hythe mentioned Romania and Bulgaria specifically, I was surprised that he did not acknowledge the work that we had carried out.

Furthermore, we recognise and encourage the aspirations of other states in the enlargement process, especially the other two Baltic states, Slovakia, which has made good progress recently, and Malta, which has

recently come back into the frame with its renewed application. A couple of weeks ago, I visited Malta and the Maltese are thoroughly preparing their accession negotiations, so that they will be in a position to take advantage of them when the time comes—despite the fact that the hon. Member for Chesham and Amersham (Mrs. Gillan) seems to be laughing at the prospect. That time will be as soon as possible.

The right hon. and learned Member for Folkestone and Hythe and his colleagues were keen to disown what he daringly described at one point as his sister parties in the EU. I think that he was also keen to disown some of his party's MEPs, who obviously work closely with the European People's party group. He should read the information that I found on the internet yesterday, in which the links of Tory Members of the European Parliament with the European People's party are trumpeted. The list of the key positions held by Tory MEPs in the European People's party is highlighted.

It is good to remind the House of what the allies of the Tory party are putting forward in the European elections. My right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary rightly entertained us, but perhaps I could add something that he did not mention—the phrase in the European People's party manifesto that the party was committed to greater social integration.

It being Ten o'clock, the motion for the Adjournment of the House lapsed, without Question put.

NORTHERN IRELAND GRAND COMMITTEE

Motion made, and Question put forthwith, pursuant to Standing Order No. 116 (Northern Ireland Grand Committee (sittings)),

That the Order of the House of 2nd December relating to sittings of the Northern Ireland Grand Committee shall have effect with the substitution in line 3 for the words '10th June' of the words '24th June'—*[Mr. Clelland.]*

Question agreed to.

BUSINESS OF THE HOUSE

Ordered,

That, at the sitting on Wednesday 26th May—

(1) the Speaker shall put the Questions necessary to dispose of proceedings on the Motions in the names of Margaret Beckett or Mrs. Marion Roe relating to—

(a) Line of Route not later than two hours after the Motion has been entered upon;

(b) Financial Assistance to Opposition Parties not later than one and a half hours after the Motion has been entered upon;

and the second Motion may be entered upon and proceeded with, though opposed, after Ten o'clock;

(2) the Questions referred to in paragraph (1) shall include the Questions on any Amendments selected by the Speaker which may then be moved; and

(3) the Motion in the name of Margaret Beckett relating to Select Committees (Quorum) may be entered upon and proceeded with, though opposed, after Ten o'clock.—*[Mr. Clelland.]*

PETITION

Immigration Legislation

10 pm

Fiona Mactaggart (Slough): I have the honour to present a petition signed by more than 3,000 supporters of Christian Action for Justice in Immigration Law. I think it is appropriate that I present this petition as the Member of Parliament for Slough. The petitioners are concerned about the divisions in Britain's nationality law that were created and entrenched by the 1968 commonwealth immigrants legislation. Although it was introduced by a Labour Government, the previous Members of Parliament for Eton and Slough, Joan Lestor and Lord Fenner Brockway, voted in this and in another place against that racially discriminatory legislation. The British Nationality Act 1981 continued many of the divisions, and it is still in force today. It introduced the situation that concerns the petitioners whereby children can be born in this country and not be British. The petition states:

To the House of Commons

The petition of Christian Action for Justice in Immigrations Law, its sponsoring organisations, citizens and residents of the United Kingdom

declares that UK immigration legislation has been deliberately framed to be interpreted in a racially discriminatory manner—as evidenced by Cabinet papers of 1955 and 1961—and racial discrimination is now entrenched in the 1981 British Nationality Act;

further declares that the building of a truly multi-ethnic Britain demands new and inclusive nationality legislation which redefines national identity to reflect the nature of British society after post-war immigration.

The petitioners, therefore, request that the House of Commons urge the Secretary of State for the Home Department to:

1. establish a single British nationality with equal rights for all who are our responsibility in international law.

2. restore the principle of British citizenship for all those born in the United Kingdom.

The petitioners remain etc.

To lie upon the Table.

Photovoltaic Energy

Motion made, and Question proposed, That this House do now adjourn.—*[Mr. Clelland.]*

10.2 pm

Dr. Alan Whitehead (Southampton, Test): As hon. Members will know, the United Kingdom has signed up to a 12 per cent. reduction in 1990 levels of CO_2 emissions and is likely to be one of the few countries that will achieve its initial commitments under the Kyoto protocol within the time scale that has been set. However, that target has largely been achieved by the environmental success of a policy—the so-called "dash for gas"—that was designed by the previous Government primarily for another policy purpose.

Gas power generation, although less profligate with CO_2 emissions then other forms of power generation, still relies on a fossil fuel and generates substantial amounts of CO_2. As we approach the next stage of CO_2 savings—perhaps the UK's commitment of a 20 per cent. reduction in emissions—the curve of pain becomes steeper. There does not appear to be a second wave of magic solutions that will allow us to reach such commitments without pain.

One of the most promising avenues in that context is the aim of progressively replacing energy supply from fossil fuels with supply by renewable methods. The Government's commitment to supply 10 per cent. of energy by renewable means by 2010 is therefore laudable and is set out well in the recent consultative paper from the Department of Trade and Industry, "New and renewable energy—prospects for the 21st Century".

The paper singles out offshore and onshore wind power and biomass energy generation as the two most immediate technologies that will contribute to that target. In a clear and straightforward manner, the paper lays the ghost of the belief that renewable energy is the province of dreaming cranks. Scientific advances have made the contemplation of substantial energy generation by renewables a real and economically feasible prospect. Indeed, other countries have already almost achieved that. Brazil produces 80 per cent. of its energy from hydro-electricity or biomass conversion. Denmark is projected eventually to provide 36 per cent. of its total energy requirements from wind power.

It is therefore disappointing to read in the otherwise excellent consultative document that photovoltaics is regarded as a long-term prospect at best and does not feature strongly as a leading likely source of renewable energy. That is particularly disappointing because, of the leading sources of renewable energy, photovoltaics has, perhaps, recently enjoyed the most spectacular scientific development as a viable technology, but it is, possibly, why PV remains a marginal contributor, in the UK at least.

It is possible that received thought still believes that PV involves slinging huge, clunking solar panels on to the side of buildings, thereby offending passers-by and planning committees alike. It is possible also that the deeply ingrained British myth that it rains here most of the time, and when it does not, it is foggy, creates a belief that PV is fine in equatorial Africa but is not for the likes of us. On the contrary, modern PV installations work well with light, and do not need bright sunshine. Thin-film technology means that typical PV installations need be no more obtrusive than the normal tiles on the roof of a house. Technological development is proceeding rapidly in, among other places, the sustainable energy research group at Southampton university in my constituency.

The failure to exploit PV represents not one, but two, lost opportunities for the UK. Not only are we denying ourselves the benefit of a viable and entirely renewable energy source, but we are starving a potentially economically important and world leading industry of the domestic market from which it could gain for its successful development. That market is expanding globally as quickly as that for mobile telephones or internet services.

The UK currently has 10 per cent. of the world's photovoltaics market, but almost all installations built or researched by UK companies are not in the UK. The photovoltaics industry in the UK employs about 400 people only. The lack of a mass production market in the UK leads to continuing high costs for PV installations, which in turn damps down demand further.

Furthermore, as I shall illustrate, contrary to the policies of a number of other countries with comparable climates, our regulatory arrangements consciously discriminate against the successful spread of PV. Germany currently has embarked on the 100,000 roofs programme, which is designed to establish that number of individual PV installations by 2004. Japan aims to supply 4,600 MW from PV installations—an output equivalent to that of four fossil-fuelled power stations—by 2010. The USA plans for 1 million roofs to be powered by PV by 2010. All those schemes are supported by a form of underwriting in the first instance, through regulation of the purchase regime for energy or through installation grants.

Other countries do not regard PV as a long-term technology; they are investing in PV programmes now. Those programmes are inevitably stimulating manufacturers and supplies based in those countries. Already, one of the leading solar energy developers, BP Solar, has announced that, tragically, it is moving most of its activities to where the market is—the USA—following the company's takeover of Amoco. By contrast, Britain has just announced an experimental programme, which is welcome in context, to underwrite PV installations on 100 roofs, at a cost of £1 million.

I do not want to argue only on the basis that the British have a habit of being left behind in the commercial application of new technologies. I want to argue for the development of a self-sustaining market in the UK which may require some support at the start but which, with proper assistance and regulation, could, in a relatively short time, supply substantial elements of UK domestic and commercial power needs at competitive prices.

The reason why such a market is eminently feasible in the UK lies in our high degree of urbanisation. Other forms of renewable energy require fast-flowing streams, windy headlands or set-aside land on which to grow willow. One cannot develop those technologies in urban areas, but 80 per cent. of us live in towns and cities, under that great unexploited resource of the modern age: the urban roof. The average south-facing roof can sustain PV tiles that can generate upwards of 2,000 units of electricity per annum, when the consumption of the average household runs only to about 2,500 units a year.

In other words, one's own roof, doing nothing but staying where it is, can replace 80 per cent. of one's electricity requirement year in, year out. To put it another way, each square metre of installed PV on a roof saves more than 1 tonne of carbon emissions from fossil fuel energy over its projected lifetime of 20 years.

There are severe impediments. I have already mentioned the cost, which largely derives from the lack of the economies that large scale production brings. At present, to install solar tiles producing 2,000 units a year would cost about £8,000. I believe in putting my money where my mouth is. I am actively investigating the feasibility of installing PV tiles on the south-facing roof of my own home, but the installation cost currently means that, despite my inflated salary as a Member of Parliament, I must act from political commitment to do that now, rather than from the reasonable economic self-interest to which an economically viable industry should work.

The installation cost is further exacerbated by a regime of energy charging and payment that can be described only as acutely discouraging. It is possible for small producers to receive payment for supply to the national grid. Wind turbines and other renewable programmes work on that principle, but the regime for PV is uniquely punitive.

If one has a PV roof installed, one will consume energy from the grid at some times of the year, such as during the winter. In summer, one is likely to supply substantial amounts of energy to the grid, but one will face two hurdles. First, electricity companies require two meters to be installed at considerable cost, although the technology exists to install a two-way net meter at a much lower cost. Secondly, one pays five times as much for energy received from the national grid—for example, during the winter—as one is paid for supplying it during the summer. Not surprisingly, therefore, the equation does not balance very effectively at present.

Mr. Gareth R. Thomas (Harrow, West): My hon. Friend is making an excellent case. Is he aware of the German electricity feed law, which in some of the Länder guarantees a rate for electricity from renewable sources of up to 90 per cent. of the price of electricity sold through the grid? Is that not in stark contrast with the attitude of British companies? Would not a sustainable energy agency help to resolve such difficulties?

Dr. Whitehead: I am delighted to hear that telling point from my hon. Friend, who I know will shortly present to the House a ten-minute Bill on the subject.

In Germany and other countries, the ratio of energy supply to energy receipt is much more balanced. The situation in the UK resembles nothing more than a rip-off by the electricity companies, if I may use the vernacular.

If we discount the high hurdles that my hon. Friend illustrated by reference to other countries, there are compelling arguments for the inclusion of PV as an early rather than a late entrant to the armoury of a UK renewables programme.

Mr. David Drew (Stroud): I was fortunate to hold a consultation meeting last Friday on the Government's renewable energy paper, which was well received. I noticed that there were advocates for wind energy and for hydro-energy, and that they were well organised. Although everyone present was in favour of photovoltaic energy, there did not seem to be the same organised effort to get it into play.

Dr. Whitehead: My hon. Friend makes an important point. There are relatively powerful advocates of various kinds of renewable energy. One of the attractive and powerful features of the consultative document is that it demonstrates how a mesh of different forms of renewables can make a contribution together. My point tonight, which I think is shared by my hon. Friend, is that photovoltaic energy seems to have been left behind, to the detriment both of the development of the British PV industry, and to the contribution that it can plainly make to the future of renewables.

It will take some imagination on the part of Government to put PV back on the starting line of a good quality UK renewables programme. That imagination is needed to create the climate whereby such an outcome could be achieved and business, unlike that in other forms of renewables, would simply and quietly proceed. There would not be anguished discussions about the intrusion of turbines on the landscape, the damming of a beautiful valley for headwater or the ecological effects of a monoculture for biomass generation. A large number of roofs would simply change colour over time, from red to dark brown.

What imaginative measures are needed? First, the regulator could easily and simply require that a level playing field for PV-supplied electricity should be established through a fair remuneration policy and a net metering regime. That in itself would transform the economics of PV installations. In that context, I am greatly encouraged by the positive reply to a written question that I received today from the Minister, and I thank him for that.

Secondly, we are not at an experimental stage with PV. Welcome though the 100 roofs programme is, as an advance on nothing, do we need to demonstrate the technology? Perhaps we should instead place more emphasis on underwriting the move away from pilots towards large scale production which would, in itself, produce the economy of operation needed for long term United Kingdom viability. Installation grants and guarantees in respect of a larger number of roofs are perhaps the best way to develop capacity in the long term.

Thirdly, we need long term support for the development of the United Kingdom PV sector. A modest target for United Kingdom companies to have 15 per cent. of the world PV market by 2010 would provide an enormous and ultimately self-sustaining boost to jobs and production in this country. Government research and development and production support would be, and should be, short term and finite. The key is to boost and mature the United Kingdom's position, not to subsidise it eternally. The most immediate way of achieving that would be to include in future non-fossil fuel obligations a specific tranche for PV—perhaps 10 per cent. of the total.

Fourthly, we need to recognise that our energy supply is heavily subsidised, and has been over a long period. Between 1990 and 1995, £4.6 billion went to subsidise fossil fuel and an astonishing £11 billion went to subsidise nuclear power. During the same period, only £0.3 billion, or only 2 per cent. of all subsidies, went to renewables.

[Dr. Whitehead]

A modest redirection of short term subsidy—perhaps aimed at solar mortgages at reasonable rates, installation grants or value added tax reductions on installations—would give a cost-effective push to the establishment of clean energy in a way that subsidies to energy production have signally failed to provide to date.

Generally, an exemption for renewables from the proposed energy tax would be a great help to the successful development not only of photovoltaics, but all renewable energy sources. The ultimate benefit would be a power source that would be taken for granted but would be entirely sustainable. It would be no great adventure to install units on roofs as houses were built and it would be unremarkable that shops, garages and office buildings had unobtrusive PV generators built into their fabric.

That is the case with a few pioneering buildings in the United Kingdom and a good example, which is close to my home, is the 7.2 kW installation on a new building on the Highfield campus at Southampton university. The building is remarkable because it is remarkably like an ordinary building. BP will shortly install similarly unremarkable PV generation capacity on the roofs of all its service stations.

By backing PV alongside other renewables, we would achieve the best outcome—a sustainable society that would look and feel like society does at present. We would still live a pleasant and sophisticated urban life with all that goes with it. The difference would be that we would be using our urban environment to make that life possible rather than depleting the rest of our world through the demands that our urban living makes on it.

10.19 pm

The Minister for Energy and Industry (Mr. John Battle): I sincerely thank my hon. Friend the Member for Southampton, Test (Dr. Whitehead) for securing the debate. In the House and elsewhere, he is proving to be a champion of solar power, and photovoltaics in particular, and I welcome other colleagues who have stayed to join in tonight's debate. Although we have had one or two debates on renewable energy, I think that this is our first on solar energy. I am absolutely sure, however, that I will not be able to give him all that he asks for. In all sincerity, I urge him to continue to champion this example of renewable energy.

I represent inner-city Leeds and live in one of my constituency's terraced houses. I dream of the day when we can use solar power to heat our homes. We have fewer centrally heated homes than any other constituency in Britain. Fuel poverty is a massive problem, and I think that if we can crack it we really will have the energy efficiency and home warmth that we envisage for the future.

The role of sustainable development is clear. That includes tackling what some would call not climate change, which is too benign a term, but climate destabilisation. The subject arose at a meeting with the International Energy Agency only today. Climate destabilisation will cause a massive on-cost as people pick up the bills for floods, rising tides, storms and so forth. We should aim for economic, social and environmental objectives simultaneously, so that we can meet environmental imperatives while also providing the energy services that people need at a reasonable cost. The challenge will necessitate the use of certain technologies involving new, alternative and renewable sources of energy, as well as combined heat and power.

I do not want to set one renewable energy source against another. Energy from wind, water, biomass and waste, and solar energy can blend in local communities to provide precisely the mixture that is needed for the future. Renewable energy will contribute to the meeting of our Kyoto commitments, and our Government's targets for the tackling of carbon dioxide emissions and greenhouse gases.

I am proud to say that, under our presidency of the European Council of Ministers, I chaired the Energy Council. We put the renewables paper on the agenda. We are bringing renewables in from the margins. It may be said that we are doing so in too modest a way, but we are getting there. What is certain is that new and renewable energy sources are essential components of any cost-effective climate-change strategy.

As well as considering the possible contribution of renewables to sustainable energy supplies, the review that I launched assessed their potential contribution to the meeting of future greenhouse gas reduction commitments—in particular, our target for a 20 per cent. reduction in carbon dioxide emissions by 2010. Our 10 per cent. renewables target alone could lead to a reduction of some 5 million tonnes of UK carbon dioxide emissions, a valuable contribution in itself.

We already generate 2 per cent. of our electricity from renewables, and we are on target to achieve 5 per cent. by 2003. The fifth non-fossil fuel obligation round of the 261 projects involves consideration of onshore and offshore wind generation; it also features examination of biomass and wave technologies. Such techniques could take us beyond the 5 per cent. target, and towards 10 per cent.

Let me point out to my hon. Friend, and to my hon. Friend the Member for Harrow, West (Mr. Thomas), that there is a difference between the non-fossil fuel obligation—which is a price support system for people who build new power stations to generate energy—and grants that people need to make their homes more energy-efficient. I am not sure whether the NFFO mechanism is the right one.

I announced in the consultation paper that accompanied the new and renewable energy paper that the funding of our research support programme would increase from the present £11 million a year to £18 million a year in three years, totalling more than £43 million over the period. That will reinforce our attempt to promote renewable energy sources.

We do attach importance to technologies such as PV, the use of fuel cells and wave energy, and I believe that they will make a significant contribution. We are not attempting to neglect or overlook them. However, the work that has been done under the Department of Trade and Industry programme has been aimed at assessing PV technology, and dealing with some of the barriers to its introduction and development. The Foresight Scolar programme has evolved, installing PV in more than 100 schools in an effort to gain experience of installation.

I think it fair to say that there has been support for solar technologies over the past 20 years. We have doubled the budget for PV to £1 million. What we have discovered is

not that it does not work; it does. The technology is there, and we know how to make the equipment. The key issue is that this form of energy costs too much in Britain when it is competing with other forms of energy in the market place. That is the real challenge.

My hon. Friend asks how we can get the costs down when that cannot be done through a mass market. I am not sure that I could convince my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions, or my right hon. Friend the Minister for Local Government and Housing, that there was a quick and easy way for everyone to be given a £12,000 grant to install such systems in their homes immediately.

The Treasury is considering other energy efficiency measures. It is not that the technology is not viable: it can do the job. The key question is how we get it into homes, such as the terraced houses in my area, at a price that people and the Government can afford. At present, it is too expensive for general application in the United Kingdom, although I think that it will make a significant contribution in the future.

A typical 2 kW system on a domestic roof would cost between £10,000 and £15,000, which, over the lifetime of the system—20 to 25 years—would work out at about 35p to 50p a unit compared with the present retail price to the consumer of 7p to 8p a unit. That cost will come down as standardised systems are developed and efficiencies of bulk production come into play, but from the evidence we have it is likely to be at least a decade before PV is price competitive with other sources of energy and other energy efficiency measures.

In the domestic sector, periods of maximum supply do not match periods of demand, so there is not the scope for off-setting savings compared with gas condensing boilers and the like.

NFFO is not the ideal model, and we must try to get through the barrier of costs. The purpose of the programmes that the DTI is introducing is not to assess the technological aspects of PV, but to consider the financial and market barriers to introducing it now. Can we get it into the marketplace and reduce the cost within the next decade?

We have a programme that has funded studies to tackle the barriers, we have established guidelines for the building industry on the testing, commissioning and monitoring of PV systems, and we have produced technical guidelines for grid connection of small PV systems and a design guide for building integrated PV. The programme has already funded installations in Northumbria university, Dr. Roaf's eco-house, the solar panels at the Ford factory at Bridgend, which I have seen, and the Doxford solar offices. We keep pushing the theme, so that it catches on in that sector of the market, and that is starting to happen.

In February, at a conference in Manchester, I announced three initiatives that will take our support for PV up to a new level. They involve an investment of £15 million over three to five years, some £5 million of which will come from my Department. First, we have called for proposals for the development of PV components and systems. That will be an extension of the work already funded, but will be concerned with hardware development rather than paper studies. We want to get the technology into the developmental stage. That budget will be about £1 million, and projects will get between 25 per cent. and 50 per cent. of the total cost. They will involve collaboration between small and medium-sized enterprises.

Secondly, we have set up a field trial of about 100 homes across the country, mainly involving new build, to test the installations under UK conditions and to consider sizing of systems, types of building, different technologies and the difficult grid connection and metering issues to which my hon. Friend referred. We hope to produce from that a builders' design manual for a large-scale domestic demonstration programme.

The third initiative is the design of a scheme for demonstrations of PV in large-scale building applications. The idea is to establish best practice, and to use the buildings as a showcase for UK technology and design.

I am often asked to compare our schemes with programmes elsewhere. I have asked my counterparts how they are getting on with their projects. In the United States, the programme for 1 million solar roofs involves solar heating systems, not PV. That needs to be said, because Congress has not voted for grants to be given. In Germany, the 100,000 roofs programme is in the form of soft loans to cover 40 per cent. of the costs, so householders have to pay back the loan and raise the other 60 per cent. Their domestic energy costs are high, so it is slightly more price competitive for them to go into solar systems. I am not ruling out such programmes, and I am happy to consider financial models to see how we can get the investment. Lastly, the Japanese sunshine programme has not yet started to meet its ambitious targets because of the recession and, I am told, people's desire to hang on to their savings at present.

My hon. Friend the Member for Test mentioned the subsidies under the previous Administration to the nuclear and other industries. I say only that there are no subsidies now. We have picked up the tab for cleaning up and decommissioning the nuclear industry, as well as paying out in relation to the legacy of the coal industry, but there are no subsidies to switch directly. I make that plain: I cannot offer to redirect subsidies because they are not there to be redirected. The situation has radically changed.

I have been closely following progress with building-integrated PV. As I have mentioned, we are supporting that where we can. I recently visited the Centre for Alternative Technology in Wales, where there are directional PV rays, which enable people to crack the problem of non-south-facing homes, so the technology is moving on. It is a case simply of having the capacity to crack the problem of the financial instruments. My hon. Friend the Member for Test mentioned the notion of solar mortgages. Let us explore that in more detail in the light of his comments. I am more than happy to look again at the question of two-way net metering.

My hon. Friend said that 80 per cent. of people in our society live in cities. It is thus an urban challenge. It is a challenge for houses and terraced streets. In Britain, many homes do not get knocked down and rebuilt; it is a refurbishment problem. As well as looking at using PV in new build, I want to look at how we can use it in refurbishment projects, so that when, for example, there is enveloping of whole terraced streets across the roofs, PV is part of the whole infrastructure.

[Mr. John Battle]

That will mean looking at grant and mortgage arrangements differently, and at the funding of housing associations differently, but what my hon. Friend the Member for Test has done tonight, along with colleagues, is to insist that we inject some longer-term vision into the practical possibilities. I am more than happy to continue to work with colleagues on that agenda.

The key role of renewables will be in the medium and longer terms. Over time, we will have to reduce our dependence on fossil fuels. We will need to turn increasingly to energy efficiency and non-fossil sources.

We hope to meet the 10 per cent. target by around 2010. We think that we can achieve that, but it is a modest starting point. We will have to move on a lot further than that as we move into the 21st century. PV will then come into its own.

Recently, I was encouraged when I visited a company that makes PV on a small scale. It is undertaking a development project—

The motion having been made after Ten o'clock, and the debate having continued for half an hour, MR. DEPUTY SPEAKER *adjourned the House without Question put, pursuant to the Standing Order.*

Adjourned at twenty-eight minutes to Eleven o'clock.

House of Commons

Wednesday 26 May 1999

The House met at half-past Nine o'clock

PRAYERS

[MADAM SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

Adjournment (Whitsun)

Motion made, and Question proposed, That this House do now adjourn.—*[Mr. Hill.]*

9.33 am

Mr. Joe Ashton (Bassetlaw): I do not usually waste the time of the House and I shall be brief today. I raise an important issue that did not arise until last weekend. The reports that appeared in many newspapers must have emanated from the Department for Education and Employment; they said that work permits for foreign footballers were to be changed drastically. Work permits are required for footballers who were not born within the European Community, and who come from Africa, south America and eastern Europe.

In general, the game welcomes an examination of the rules; they were originally made in 1975 when Britain was not in the EC, when there were only a handful of foreign players and when large amounts of cash were not involved. Criteria were laid down stating that foreign players had to be internationals, that they had to make 75 per cent. of appearances, that their work permits had to be renewed every year and that they were not permitted to take British jobs. That situation has trundled on for 20-odd years despite massive changes in the game and the involvement of huge sums of money.

There are good reasons for re-examining the rules. I shall not go into the details of the squad system, the Bosman ruling on transfers, the enormous amount of television money through Sky and all the other changes that have been made, but I believe that the system is unfair in that some clubs seem to get work permits for their players and others do not.

This is not a discussion about football, but about jobs and work. I am raising the subject today because of the unfortunate timing of the press release. All players' contracts expire on 30 June, which is the deadline by which clubs must say to players, "We are very sorry, but you are not good enough. Your contract is over and you are free to go without a transfer fee," or, "We want to keep you on." The fact that the announcement was made five weeks before that deadline, with the House rising until 8 June, has plunged many clubs into doubt and uncertainty. We are talking about some 48 players, some of whom are very high calibre, have contracts worth millions of pounds and are being paid thousands of pounds per week.

I understand that the Department for Education and Employment met the Football Association and the players' union this week for talks, but there must be an announcement from the Department in the next week or so about certain issues. We have to know whether new rules will start at the beginning of next season or at the beginning of the 2000 season. How long will the talks continue?

Last season—and practically every season—600 professional footballers were made redundant. Their clubs tell them that they are not good enough or say that they want to change the team. Many of them are British. The Professional Footballers Association protest that they can be replaced by players from eastern Europe, who are probably paid only £25 or £50 a week and who think that £200 for playing in the English third division is a great deal of money. The Professional Footballers Association is worried about that and about the effect on the English national team. It feels that if all our teams carry nine or 10 foreign footballers, there is not much scope for future Beckhams to come through the ranks. Their entry at an early stage is blocked.

Those doubts have created a great deal of uncertainty concerning the 48 professional footballers from outside the EC. This very week, their clubs are deciding whether to renew their contracts and apply for new work permits starting on 30 June, or whether to take a chance on the rules being changed. They do not know what to do. I have been asked by the chairman of the premier league and other representatives of the game to make approaches to the Department and to ask for a statement. I rang the Department for Education and Employment yesterday and told them that I was raising the matter today. Instead of leaving everyone in limbo, there should be a moratorium or a freeze, and a statement saying that existing or renewed contracts will be exempt from the old regulations and will be covered by the new regulations, which will be more lax, until clubs and players know what to do.

Some of the players come from the former Yugoslavia and places such as Moldova, where there is a war. They do not know whether they will have to go home, whether their clubs will renew their contracts or whether they should go to Spain or Italy. What advice or reassurance can they get?

The new proposals, which were extensively leaked in the press, talk about young African footballers being sent here as apprentices, their schooling being paid for by British clubs that have their own outlets in Africa. African footballers have come to this country regularly via Belgium, which has strong African connections and less strict work permits. Some of the youngsters who have gone for trials in Belgium have done so without a return ticket home and have finished up virtually on the streets of a foreign country, unable to speak the language.

The situation needs explaining. I hope that Ministers can make a written statement, preferably before the end of the week, because the announcement two days ago has thrown the game into chaos.

9.40 am

Mrs. Angela Browning (Tiverton and Honiton): I am grateful for the opportunity to bring to the House this morning a situation affecting a group of elderly constituents. This is a problem of which many hon. Members will have had experience.

The problem concerns those people who, in the 1980s, were sold home income plans—very often by companies or independent financial advisers—and who remortgaged a house. The mortgages on most of the houses had been

[Mrs. Angela Browning]

paid for. People did this to release capital, which was then reinvested into bonds, usually comprising solely equity funds. As a result of the transaction, when the people who were then remortgaged tried not only to draw an income from the investments, but to pay off the new mortgage, they found that the funds simply did not marry up.

I am well aware that there are some bona fide and useful home income plans on the market of which many retired people may wish to take advantage. I am talking particularly about a period when these plans were sold—sometimes deliberately—quite fraudulently. I want to draw attention to a group of pensioners with mortgages against the property in which they live. The vast majority of them no longer have any income from the original plan, and are in a situation where interest is accruing against the value of their property.

Many have been concerned that they will be turned out of their homes. In other such cases, the building societies or the lenders—it is mainly building societies—have said that they can remain in their homes. However, when they die, or if they have to move, the building society has first call on the value of the property. The matter has gone on for so long that the vast majority of those concerned are in a situation where if the house had to be sold and the capital realised, the mortgage would have to be repaid. The building society would then recoup the whole value of the property.

As people get older, this is an anxious situation for them. Before I was elected in 1992, some of those cases were brought to me. After I was elected, I had some satisfactory outcomes in one or two places with the help of the insurance ombudsman. In some cases, but not all, the underwriting attached to the new mortgage fell within the remit of the insurance ombudsman. In the early 1990s, he and his staff were extremely helpful to some of my elderly constituents.

I still have a batch of cases which fall into a particular category. A lady called Sonja Thompson, who resided in Devon—although she has a track record of living elsewhere—was brought to court on a charge of fraud. I have examined carefully the papers that she completed on behalf of my constituents in seeking to organise home income plans for them. There is no doubt in my mind that, although she was acquitted in the court case, it is as a result of her work that many of my constituents now find themselves in an anxious and difficult situation.

One of the problems has been that the building societies concerned appeared to take no notice of the lending parameters that are usually enforced when considering making a loan or offering a mortgage to someone. It was the norm for people such as Sonja Thompson to go to one particular branch of a building society because they had made contact with an individual member of staff—one assumes the management—in that branch. Given the volume of cases over a short period that were processed by a particular branch of a building society, one must question the role of the building societies.

In my constituency, the group of people who are left in this unhappy situation have mortgages primarily with the Britannia building society. I asked the Britannia building society to discuss the matter with me last year—which it did—and I was given a written pledge that my elderly constituents would not be turned out of their homes simply because the interest on the mortgage was accruing at a rate much faster than any of them could hope to repay.

That is not a satisfactory situation, and there is a need for some examination of the role of building society branches. It is incumbent on the head offices of building societies—which have reputations that they would wish to uphold—to take more responsibility for examining the way in which their staff dealt with such cases.

At the moment, I have five constituents who live in a home that has always been their home, but which they feel no longer belongs to them. They are living there by grace and favour of the building society. They know that when they die, the proceeds from that home will not go to their children or heirs, but will be reclaimed, under law, by the building society concerned. We appreciate that building societies will not turn people out of their homes, but the justice of the case needs to be examined. Clearly, these elderly people were conned, fooled and—in some cases—quite deliberately defrauded into signing an agreement that they did not really understand.

In one case, I have seen copies of documentation that has been altered by the person writing the details of somebody's income. Building societies accepted case after case without any proper scrutiny, and without checking that the information was bona fide or that the people concerned could afford to take out a plan that was in their best interests. We must look to bring some pressure to bear on building societies to take responsibility for the actions of their own staff.

Many societies will say that mortgages do not come within the Financial Services Act 1986. I accept that, but that is not the point. A building society wants to know what one earns and how one will afford to repay a mortgage, as is right and proper. I have written to the Economic Secretary this month, as I feel that I have exhausted every avenue left to me through the ombudsman, the various other bodies and direct representations to building societies.

I ask the Parliamentary Secretary to reiterate my request to the Economic Secretary to receive a delegation to talk this matter through. Some of these are complex cases, and solicitors have said that they would be happy to reintroduce some of them into the courts. However, there are difficulties because of the age of the client group. A solicitor to whom I spoke last week was willing to take the case on a no win, no fee basis, and he told me that he knows of barristers who are prepared to accept cases on the same basis. However, we must bear in mind the fact that we are talking about people who do not have a lot of money.

The problem that the solicitor has encountered has been with the Legal Aid Board. He told me of one couple, aged 82 and 79, with a total income of £137 a week. They would qualify for legal aid, but the Legal Aid Board requires them to pay £67 a month towards their legal aid costs. That is clearly prohibitive for people on a modest income, and even though the lawyers are prepared to proceed on a no win, no fee basis, the need to find £67 a month to qualify for legal aid is holding up the case.

Not all the cases are exactly the same. I have introduced the additional element of running a test case through the courts because if such a case is successfully prosecuted, many more could be resolved pretty rapidly. I stress that

the age of the people involved means that unless something is done quickly, even more of them will die without a satisfactory resolution.

Many hon. Members have dealt with many complex and difficult constituency cases. In the previous Parliament, we had an ad hoc all-party group that invited the building societies and everyone involved to come and meet us. I think that it was useful, although I do not know that we resolved any individual cases. Now is the time for individual action. We should call in the building societies to discuss their role, and consider how to get over the legal aid block.

Will the Minister endorse my application to the Economic Secretary? There are too many complexities for us to go into every individual case on the Floor of the House, but a meeting with the Economic Secretary and her officials, with appropriate representatives involved, would be of great assistance to my elderly constituents and those of many other hon. Members.

Mr. Ashton: On a point of order, Madam Speaker. I apologise to the House for having forgotten to declare an interest when I spoke. I am a vice-president and shareholder of Sheffield Wednesday, although I do not get paid. I intended to declare that earlier.

Madam Speaker: Thank you.

9.52 am

Mr. Fabian Hamilton (Leeds, North-East): I want first to say one or two words about my late colleague, Derek Fatchett. I know that much has been said in the House following his untimely and tragic death two weeks ago, but I want to add to the generous comments made by my right hon. Friends the Foreign Secretary and the Prime Minister, by the shadow Foreign Secretary and by the new Minister of State, Foreign and Commonwealth Office, my hon. Friend the Member for Ashfield (Mr. Hoon).

When Derek's funeral took place on 14 May, there were well over 1,000 people at Leeds parish church—from all over the city of Leeds and from all walks of life, religions, races and backgrounds—who had come to pay tribute to a man who had served them very well indeed as a constituency Member of Parliament. Much has been said about his work in government, but let us not forget that he was a constituency Member for Leeds, Central for 16 years. He was a good friend of mine, and a mentor to me and to all the other Leeds Members who worked so closely with him.

I want to raise an issue that came to me through two of my constituents, a couple in late middle age with a daughter who is now in her mid-20s and who, sadly and for all sorts of complex reasons, went into prostitution. My constituency covers the area of Chapeltown, which is well known, unfortunately, for its link with prostitution. I stress that my constituent does not live in the area, but in another part of my constituency.

The couple who came to see me raised the issue not of prostitution itself, but of the pimps who make so much money in immoral earnings. Those pimps abuse the women who earn so much for them, and often steal their money and possessions to feed drug habits and expensive life styles, with fast cars and designer clothes. The women are made to suffer.

My constituents told me that their daughter's pimp, who must be typical of many throughout Leeds and the whole country, abused her, beat her and raped her. For all his violence towards her, it seems impossible to bring him to justice. When he is arrested after she has been beaten all night by him and his friends, she gives a statement to the police, but is forced to withdraw it because he sends his friends round. She is intimidated by his friends and allies, even while he is held in custody. The statement never sees the light of day in court, despite her bruises and the violence perpetrated against her.

The mother addressed a conference organised by the Coalition for the Removal of Pimping, known as CROP. The names have been changed to protect those involved. She said:

"Until she was thirteen, Frances was a quiet, shy, generous, gentle child. A sudden change came with her going to high school. She was blind drunk at thirteen, egged on by new acquaintances, truanting, absconding all night, getting stranded in Manchester, shoplifting and in trouble with the police. She might have come through such a phase as many do, but at this disturbed time she fell prey to Yosh. At the time we had little idea what was going on, no sense of where it might lead and so, no chance to do anything."

The mother continued:

"With charm and presents—and sex and drugs—he laid siege to this vulnerable young girl with no obvious hard family protection . . . We were, however, also suspicious and one day when challenged she said that she could not tell me what she was actually doing which was acting as a courier for drugs. It is interesting that in the hierarchy of social problems, drugs are more respectable than prostitution. Prostitution is a complete taboo, and for years we could not talk about it to anyone, not even our close friends. It is too painful to think about your daughter's life having come to this."

My constituent said:

"She has been raped, beaten, robbed and emotionally abused. She has lost her possessions, including money from her grandfather and any jewellery, her self worth and, most recently, she has lost the care of her adorable son . . .

Sometimes there were signs of hope. In 1995 she made a complaint to the police and Yosh was on remand for four months. It was wonderful to have him out of the way and we could sleep knowing that she was relatively safe. She had been assured, however, that if she made a statement others would come forward with corroborative evidence, but unfortunately apart from ourselves, no-one else completed what was needed. These cowardly men induce great fear and a sense of loyalty that seems to those outside quite incredible—and most frustrating! Eventually Frances was no longer able to live with the pressure that Yosh exerted from inside prison, both through phone calls and messages through his agents, male and female . . . she withdrew her statement . . . There is something wrong about a system of so-called justice that has to depend on the evidence of frightened vulnerable, essentially unprotected young women, it is not surprising that they often do not hold on through the inappropriately long delays in bringing a case to court. In addition, this episode highlighted another issue. One of Frances's friends was prepared to make a corroborative statement but on at least three occasions the police failed to keep an appointment with her,"

so Yosh was released.

Yosh returned once again, demanding money, and Frances returned to prostitution because that was the only way of paying for his drugs and designer clothes. It is not just the life of this vulnerable young woman that has been ruined; her family has also been destroyed. Frances has no life: she lives alone in a house and is subject to emotional and physical violence from this man. She has nothing and she has nothing to look forward to.

We need to ensure that, when there is plenty of evidence against that kind of individual, cases are brought to justice quickly. People such as Yosh should be

[Mr. Fabian Hamilton]

prevented from exerting pressure on vulnerable young women from inside a jail. A distinct but important point emerges from this episode. When someone is charged with various offences, they should be heard together. A dismissal of some of the charges should certainly not result in release—especially when the majority of charges have been dropped because the complainant is afraid. There is a danger that this case will never come to court because Yosh again has an opportunity to reach those who have brought the charges against him. The fear, misery and destruction of vulnerable people will go unchecked.

I hope that, as a result of the points that I have made this morning, the Home Office will examine cases such as this involving not only the pimp, Yosh, and Frances, my constituent's daughter, but other vulnerable young women in the Chapeltown area of Leeds who are at the mercy of such individuals. I hope that the police will be able to gather the necessary evidence, and that the law will ensure that those people are brought to justice and removed from the lives of so many vulnerable people—especially women who have been abused.

10.1 am

Mr. Nicholas Winterton (Macclesfield): I am pleased to make a brief contribution to the debate this morning. Recess Adjournment debates provide an ideal opportunity for Back-Bench Members to raise constituency issues that it is difficult to discuss on other occasions. I raise this matter this morning on the advice of Madam Speaker. I have referred briefly at Question Time to the road infrastructure in my constituency, and particularly to the need for a dramatic improvement in the A523 road leading from Macclesfield to the village of Poynton.

The hon. Member for Hazel Grove (Mr. Stunell) is in his place and he will know precisely to what I refer. That road improvement, allied to the Poynton bypass and the Manchester airport eastern link road—I hope that the hon. Gentleman will not mind if I refer also to the A6(M)—is absolutely essential to the on-going economic development and prosperity of my constituency and the surrounding areas, particularly those represented by the hon. Gentleman and by my hon. Friend the Member for Cheadle (Mr. Day), who is not in his place.

I make a vigorous plea to the Government. I managed to get the Poynton bypass and allied road projects—the A523 road improvement and the Manchester airport eastern link road—included in a priority road programme in the last months of the Conservative Government in 1996-97. Unfortunately, one of the first acts of the new Labour Government was to remove that vital road project from the road improvement and construction programmes.

The second runway at Manchester airport received substantial support in my area on the basis that an appropriate road and transportation network would be constructed to service that runway and the huge increase in traffic and customers using Manchester International airport. I am sure that all hon. Members can appreciate the concern felt by my constituents, especially those who live in the villages of Poynton, Prestbury, Withinlee and Mottram St. Andrew. The relief that they thought would be provided by the construction of new roads has not come to pass, and those villages are being submerged under a huge volume of traffic.

Much of the traffic from east Cheshire to Manchester, and from the south-east of Macclesfield to Manchester, the airport and towards the M56 and the M6 uses those villages as rat runs. The environment of those villages is being undermined, eroded and I would even say destroyed. Some of those areas are really delightful. Properties are expensive and people pay a great deal of council tax. I believe that they deserve greater consideration than the Government are apparently affording them by removing those vital road improvement and construction projects from the road programme.

An event of considerable importance not just to my constituency and Manchester, but to the country as a whole, is the 2002 Commonwealth games. It is essential to ensure that the appropriate road infrastructure and transport and communications networks are in place to service those games. Such projects will be vital in the lead-up to the games and the new facilities will be used increasingly upon their conclusion. I make a special plea for the Government to consider those schemes as a matter of urgency. The south Manchester transportation module—I think that is what it is called; I am sure that the hon. Member for Hazel Grove will correct me if I am wrong—must conclude its deliberations and consultations about those projects, and decisions must be taken urgently.

I am aware that the Government are seeking to transfer responsibility for those roads from the Highways Agency to the highway authority, Cheshire county council. If that is to be the Government's policy, I hope that they will allocate appropriate funds to Cheshire county council to enable the construction of what I would describe as strategic roads. They are part of the country's infrastructure. I am sure that every hon. Member will accept that Manchester International airport serves not only Manchester and its surrounding areas, but the whole country. There will be a huge increase in business when the second runway comes into operation in 18 months to two years. No roads will be built for five, six or seven years, even if the Government give the go-ahead in the near future. However, this is an urgent matter to which I hope the Minister will respond sympathetically.

The road projects are supported fully by Cheshire county council, Macclesfield borough council, Poynton with Worth parish council, local people, the chamber of commerce and enterprise and the large employers who generate so much wealth and so many jobs—Ciba Specialty Chemicals and Astra Zeneca, the pharmaceutical company. Many other companies are also urging the Government to act in this regard.

I turn now to one or two other matters that need to be raised, and on the first—developments in the health service—I make a particular plea about the East Cheshire NHS trust. I understand that there may be changes in the health service and that where community and mental health services are currently part of a united trust, they may well be separated. My area has one trust that deals with everything within the national health service, including community health, mental health and acute services.

The East Cheshire NHS trust is highly successful and efficient, and very well regarded by general practitioners, who look to the hospital to provide all the services and specialties. It has an excellent chairman in Mr. Peter Hayes, a fine executive board and non-executive directors who reflect the interests of the whole area. It would be a

total waste of money to separate services from that trust, thus duplicating or triplicating the bureaucracy and costs of managing the health service. If separation took place, the trust would be a less viable proposition.

I have represented Macclesfield for 28 years, and its people feel immense loyalty to the local hospital. I put down a marker that I hope that where an area is keen to retain a united, single trust covering all NHS services which has proved to be successful, it will be able to do so.

Finally, I turn briefly to building societies, particularly mutual building societies. The Cheshire building society, which is based in my constituency, is excellent. It is Macclesfield's own; its head office is in Castle street, in the centre of the town. I got my mortgages from that building society. Another, the Vernon building society, is just outside my constituency and that of the hon. Member for Hazel Grove. That is also a highly popular, regional building society which does an excellent job. It is competitive and well run, as is the Cheshire building society.

A few people, however, seek to manipulate the market by buying into those building societies and then trying to turn them into a bank, which is not in the best long-term interests of the investors or those who borrow from the building societies. I am interested to note that a Liberal Democrat Member has, in the past day or so, tabled early-day motion 681, which says:

"That this House urges the Government, in the interests of equity, to consider raising the percentage of borrowers needed to support conversion or take-over of building societies to 75 per cent., on a minimum 50 per cent. turnout, to bring them into line with the criteria required for savers, recognising the long-term interest of borrowers in the future of their society."

I have corresponded with the Government on that matter, and they are concerned, but they do not know exactly how to deal with it without, perhaps, in some way distorting the free market. However, I believe that the proposals in early-day motion 681 would be ideal. I say that as a Conservative Member who believes in the free market, but I believe also that the mutual building society movement has done a magnificent job for many decades, servicing those who want to buy houses and providing sensible, rational investment opportunities for those who want to put their money into them and receive a fair return.

I hope that the growing concern in all parts of the House about a few people who want to earn a quick buck and who have no interest in the building society movement will prompt the Government to take the matter seriously, and to limit the takeover of building societies and their conversion into banks.

I am grateful to have had this opportunity to speak. I hope that action will be taken on the road projects in my area which impact on adjoining constituencies. I know that the hon. Member for Hazel Grove and my hon. Friend the Member for Cheadle fully support my remarks. I hope that the Government will respond and that even if the Minister cannot himself give a substantive reply, he will ensure that the matter is passed on to the appropriate Minister and the necessary response made.

10.16 am

Mr. Alan Hurst (Braintree): I should like to associate myself entirely with the remarks made by the hon. Member for Macclesfield (Mr. Winterton) about the mutual building society movement. I am sure that his views are shared by Members in all parts of the House.

The matter that I would like to raise appertains to a subject that is not only close to the interests of my constituents but, is of national importance. That matter is the Essex and Southend-on-Sea replacement structure plan, but, before eyes glaze over, I point out that beneath that tranquillising title are some important issues that affect the lives of not only my constituents, but those of other right hon. and hon. Members.

Taken at its most simple level, the structure plan deals with, among other matters, housing need and allocation in the county of Essex and the borough of Southend-on-Sea, and covers the years from 1996 to 2011. The initial plan identified certain potential growth areas in the A12 corridor. The A12 runs out of London towards the east coast and passes through or by Chelmsford and Colchester. It also runs through my constituency, which is between those two towns.

The identification of that corridor as an area for growth caused considerable consternation not only for Braintree district council but for Chelmsford and Colchester because the road is not sufficient for the traffic now on it, without adding substantially to the housing in that part of Essex. Following representations to that effect, which were supported by the strangely named GOER—the Government office for the eastern region—that aspect was withdrawn from the structure plan.

The plan has now been released, and the panel will inspect and receive representations, and therein lies the concern of my constituents and people from other towns and districts in central and north Essex. The inspectors on the panel have an ominously named matter No. 4, on potential strategic development locations. Amazingly, in the light of the history of this matter, those locations are Chelmsford; Hatfield Peverel, Witham and Rivenhall in my constituency; Colchester; the western side of Tendring, and Uttlesford. Four of those places are in or adjacent to the A12 corridor.

Those who have been invited to make representations to the panel include developers who have already expressed a strong interest in green-field site development on the western and north-eastern sides of the town of Witham and the eastern side of the village of Hatfield Peverel. The proposals for housing allocation on pure green-field sites could add as many as 10,000 new dwellings to those being built in or close to my constituency. Another area of concern is further north in my constituency, abutting the constituency of the hon. Member for North Essex (Mr. Jenkin), in or near to the village of Feering. All those locations are prized by developers as locations for mini towns or expanded villages.

The district of Braintree, which was created in 1974 following one of the periodic local government reviews, was allocated 10,300 dwellings for the period between 1996 and 2011. My district council assures me that all those dwellings are already built, planning-consent granted or identified except for 1,150. I am assured by my local authority officers that sites for those remaining dwellings can readily be found, and that, indeed, some of them will be brown-field sites.

The investigation of green-field sites adjacent to existing settlements under matter No. 4 makes the equation an entirely new one, going way beyond what was previously contemplated. If the district requires only

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1,100 new dwellings, why are we considering debating and taking evidence from those who say that we should have in excess of 10,000 dwellings?

Save for the hon. Member for Southend, West (Mr. Amess), hon. Members may not be entirely familiar with some of the villages and towns that I have mentioned. One of the proposed developments is west of the town of Witham, which was a market town in the 1960s and 1970s, taking to itself what was then called London overspill. The building of houses in Witham at that time was entirely linked to employment; hand in hand with that development went the growth of an industrial estate to provide employment for those going to the town. These new proposals are purely speculative and will result in more and more commuting to and from Witham, Hatfield Peverel and other villages near the railway line to London.

I am concerned about this matter—I am sure that other hon. Members have similar difficulties in their constituencies—because it seems to fly in the face of our concepts of housing development and location. I try to avoid as much as I can the strange languages adopted by those in public affairs, which include such terms as "hierarchies", but I understand that if there is a hierarchy in development, it starts with brown-field sites and, only at the very last, occurs on a green-field site. Another notion, that has great merit is that of integration—integrated transport policy, for example. As I understand that, it must surely integrate with housing requirements.

There is no obvious employment need for this housing in the middle of north Essex. The road system and structure is beyond capacity at the present time. Save for the Witham and Hatfield Peverel link road, which I was pleased to be able to put before the House soon after I was elected, and which the Government approved, there are no major schemes for improving that section of road. Yet developers appear to wish to destroy what in many ways is idyllic countryside. Some who do not come from the eastern counties might not take such a poetic view as those of us who do about the scenery of that part of England. Parts of the areas that I have described are completely unspoilt countryside, which should be preserved in any event and not earmarked for speculative development.

I hope that the Minister and, indeed, the hon. Member for South Staffordshire (Sir P. Cormack), the Opposition spokesman, will concur with my view that the Government and local authorities must be ever vigilant in staying with our principles on housing, transport and employment development, and that we should not be led along to build in areas where it is easy to build, and, in so doing, destroy our heritage and create innumerable problems for us and those who come after us.

10.24 am

Mr. Andrew Stunell (Hazel Grove): I assure the House that the hon. Member for Macclesfield (Mr. Winterton) and I are not colluding in this debate. It is fair to say that we relish the political differences between us, despite sharing membership of two Select Committees and a constituency boundary. However, even without collusion, we have reached the same conclusion.

To make it an all-party plea, I very much support the hon. Gentleman's words about the Cheshire building society in his constituency and the Vernon building society in Stockport in my constituency. I hope that the Minister will be able not only to say warm words but to give some indication of positive action on that issue. I do not discount the fact that the Government have made some helpful moves, although, as we have seen with rogue shareholders in ballots, to whom the hon. Member for Macclesfield referred, such moves have not been sufficient to damp down pressure on such building societies.

The more urgent issues for my constituents relate to transport and the environment. Again, I very much sign up to the comments of the hon. Member for Macclesfield, although I should correct him on one point. It may help the Minister to know that the study to which the hon. Gentleman referred is called the multimodal study of the south-east quadrant of Greater Manchester—superb gobbledegook.

My constituents are astonished to find that they live in the south-east quadrant of Greater Manchester—I am sure that the residents of Macclesfield would be even more astonished to discover that they do so. This multimodal study is the replacement offered to me and my constituents for the necessary transport infrastructure to deal not just with today's congestion and difficulties but that which we can reasonably predict as a result of the expansion of Manchester airport.

The second runway at Manchester airport is under construction. I live in a house that backs on to a freight line on which every night a trainload of stone travels from the quarries of Derbyshire to the runway. I am grateful to the Government for arranging a rail freight grant to enable that; I do not mind my house shaking gently as the trains go by. The number of passengers at Manchester airport is expected to rise from 16 million a year to 30 million a year in three years' time. Manchester airport is of course also a substantial freight airport in its own right, so there may be further expansion in that area, too.

As a result, there will be a tremendous increase in road traffic going to the airport. The airport has an integrated transport plan. I was interested in the comments of the hon. Member for Braintree (Mr. Hurst). I shall not comment on the Essex countryside, but when it comes to integrated transport, we know a thing or two about its absence in Greater Manchester, just as they do in Essex. The airport plans to receive 50 per cent. of passengers on public transport, which is excellent. However, if the number of passengers doubles, the number of road users will increase immeasurably regardless of the doubling of the number of passengers who use public transport.

There are several park-and-ride car parks for the airport in my constituency. Therefore, some of those who travel to the airport by public transport go by car to my constituency, park their cars and then take a bus or coach. So, for my constituents, it is something of a joke to be told, "Don't worry, half the new passengers will go to the airport by public transport."

I should like to link the pressure not just of existing commuter traffic but of the growth of the airport to the wider issue of the absence of an integrated transport policy.

The Government have made some tactical moves to improve public transport, but have not produced the strategic overview that we need. For example, they have made available rural bus grants—in my constituency, the Greater Manchester passenger transport executive is

taking advantage of those grants—but the grants have some unworkable restrictions. Half of a rural bus route must be on a derestricted road. None of the route can be on the route of an existing bus service. Our new rural bus services make long detours up and over Werneth Low and down country lanes in order to achieve the 50 per cent. qualification for the rural bus grant. The links between the communities are needed. On the whole, my constituency consists of hilltop communities with river valleys running between, but it is not sensible for the bus to dodge in and out of the river valleys to get the rural bus grant.

We have 40-year-old trains on our commuter lines, and there is no sign yet that North Western Trains—which now calls itself First North West—is able or willing to provide the investment that is needed.

On the specifics of these issues, which affect my constituents, and on the wider national stage there seems to be a lack of co-ordination between Government Departments and Ministers. I shall briefly draw attention to two other issues. I have mentioned the problem with transport policy. Road schemes have been cancelled and more reviews are taking place. The Labour Government have produced a weight of reviews and consultation documents on the environment and on transport which far outweighs anything that the Conservatives did. I do mean outweighs—it is a substantial volume of paper. However, there are not yet any clear policies leading to development of strategies that would help.

I have talked about road cancellation. Fuel duty has increased and there are proposals for an energy tax. I have my rural bus routes, I have my old trains; I have not got my roads, and the airport is opening. The situation cries out for co-ordinated Government action.

Transport is not the only environmental issue on which there is discontinuity between Government Departments. I am thinking of the Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions, the Department of Trade and Industry and, to an extent, the Treasury.

When I complain about that, everyone that I talk to—civil servants, pressure groups, even Ministers—tells me that co-ordination is better than it has ever been. That makes me grateful, for the first time, that I was not in the House previously, when, apparently, the integration of thinking was even worse.

We have some classics with energy—an area on which I keep a careful eye in the House. For instance, the Department of Trade and Industry is promoting renewables and trying to ensure that there are more wind farms, but, surprisingly enough, the Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions is turning down planning applications for wind farms in great numbers. I understand that the proportion of wind farms rejected by Government inspectors is higher than that of takeaway food shops similarly rejected. That is hard to believe.

There are problems regarding other environmental issues. In relation to the achievement of the carbon emission reductions required by the Kyoto agreement to avoid climate change, the Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions is being the good guy and the Department of Trade and Industry is not. Discussions on the reconstruction of the electricity pool system are likely to result in squeezing out of the market those who produce renewable energy and combined heat and power.

I ask the Minister to listen carefully to the local constituency pleas that are being made by the hon. Member for Macclesfield and myself, and to be aware that these local issues are indicative of a wider issue. We like the consultation documents, and it is great to be asked, but please may we have some decisions—some action? A multimodal study for the south-east quadrant of Greater Manchester is no substitute for a decent strategic road system.

10.35 am

Dr. Ashok Kumar (Middlesbrough, South and Cleveland, East): Thank you, Mr. Deputy Speaker, for calling me in this debate. I know that hon. Members have been quite brief, but I have much to say today, so I apologise in advance. I shall try to finish as quickly as I can.

I wish to use this opportunity to highlight issues affecting the spending profile, performance and abilities of one of the local authorities in my constituency—Redcar and Cleveland borough council—resulting from the present operation of the revenue support grant, the standard spending assessment and the national non-domestic rate.

Initially, I shall say a few words about the social and economic background of the community for which the council is responsible. Then I shall comment on matters affecting the SSA and the revenue support grant for the council. In doing so, I want to make some suggestions for change in the context of the present review of the revenue support grant arrangements—suggestions which I hope chime with the recent report of the Select Committee on the Environment, Transport and Regional Affairs.

I have been galvanised to raise that matter in this place today by the operation of the present formula, which has caused the critical barrier of £1,000 for local band D property to be broken in the borough in the current financial year. Paying a bill of £1,000 is a serious matter, but it is a far more serious matter if one must pay such a bill in an area where there is continuing high unemployment and poverty, and where, as a result of social demography and trends, the local authority is simply running up a downcoming escalator.

Let us consider some of the facts about Redcar and Cleveland. In 1984, there were 44,000 people in work in the borough area, but in 1996—the last year for which we have proper figures—there was a reduction in the employment base of 10.5 per cent. Of the adult population, 42.8 per cent. are economically inactive, and long-term unemployment, at 26.6 per cent. of registered unemployment, is rather high.

Despite all the work of regeneration agencies, there is still little evidence of independent entrepreneurship being able to change these figures. Customs and Excise figures from the VAT registration figures show low levels of new company formation.

A low level of economic activity and a history of working lives in unhealthy and dangerous conditions in shipyards, steel mills and mines leave an indelible stain on the fabric of local society. People are simply more liable to ill-health in my constituency. Sixteen per cent. of local people are seen as suffering from persistent health problems, against an average for England and Wales of 13 per cent. The morbidity ratio is 127 against a national average of 100.

[Dr. Ashok Kumar]

People die earlier, too. The average standardised mortality ratio for Redcar and Cleveland is 115 against the average of 100 for England and Wales. I stress that these are averages for the borough as a whole; in some wards, the figures are far, far higher.

Low car ownership impairs mobility; 37.8 per cent. of local households have no car. That is a real problem, leading to social isolation on many of the borough estates and far-flung industrial villages.

Not surprisingly, there is a high level of dependency on welfare benefits. Twenty-three per cent. of households depend on income support, and 34 per cent. of the child population is being brought up in households where a weekly giro is the only cash lifeline available.

The index of local deprivation—an official measure, to which I shall return—sums up graphically what it means to live in the borough of Redcar and Cleveland. It is ranked as the forty-third most deprived borough in England, with 13.5 per cent. of its population in the worst 10 per cent. of all electoral wards in the country. It is simple, then, to see the scale of the problems that face my local authority—stupendous problems across the whole spectrum of service delivery.

Poverty and unemployment have an impact on schools. It is harder to motivate children whose life expectations are formed by the unemployment that has affected their parents, and possibly their elder siblings, too. It is far harder to teach children who come to school with empty stomachs, which is one reason why there is an initiative to give our children a school breakfast.

Sickness, ageing and debility have a heavy impact on the personal social services, and more than physical sickness is involved; there is a wealth of evidence linking poverty and unemployment with mental distress, failed relationships and broken homes. Human beings affected by those ills need a lot of help, delivered over a long period.

Demography also has an impact on the social services in areas such as mine, where there is a significant population loss as younger people move out in search of better opportunities elsewhere. That means that there are more elderly people isolated from family support, who need additional local authority help and support if they are to maintain their independence.

Poverty also has an impact on other aspects of local authority services. Where many people live on credit, the need for good trading standards and money advice services is paramount. People have to buy food cheaply, so the need for good environmental health protection is obvious.

Good partnerships are being built up with all the agencies within the borough, so that those problems can be tackled jointly. We need good relationships with the local health authorities so that ill health and health inequalities can be fought. We also need good relationships with the local universities, training and enterprise councils and colleges, so that lifelong learning can become a reality, and with the local business community, so that local industry can be competitive and meet the challenge of the coming millennium.

However, Redcar and Cleveland is being starved of the resources to deal effectively with those issues and to contribute more meaningfully to those partnerships. The impact of the standard spending assessment is totally negative.

That brings me to the second part of what I have to say: the revenue support grant needs-based formula does not reflect actual need. I merely need to point out that, under the health formula, Redcar and Cleveland's notional SSA per head, at £917, is below the £964 per head allocated to the neighbouring authority of Middlesbrough, a borough dealing with exactly the same problems.

Our £917 is dwarfed by the sum of £1,152 currently awarded to Westminster council, and by the £2,972 per head awarded to the City of London and adjoining districts. I do not dispute that there is social need in the inner city, or that the impact of a large non-resident working population has to be taken into account—but I must point out the sheer scale of the differences between the high unemployment, ill health and social isolation of the string of small ex-mining villages in my constituency, and the job and life style opportunities afforded by living in, or on the fringes of, one of the most vigorous labour markets in western Europe. The gap is enormous.

I will not go into detail about all the anomalies within the formula as it relates to elements of spending within the borough council, but I will highlight a couple of them. It is absurd that a council with a widespread pattern of settlements and towns, with the consequent need to keep the highway network up to scratch to maintain social cohesion, has been awarded £2 million less per annum for highway maintenance than the nearby town of Middlesbrough.

There is a very silly anomaly in the formula for salting and gritting snowed-up roads, which could only have come from "Yes Minister". It seems that Redcar and Cleveland has a low weighting under that formula, which is rather odd, as much of the borough is hilly and borders on high moorland. Indeed, in old Norse, Cleveland means "land of cliffs". However, the weather station on which the formula is based is outside the borough in Whitby, nearly 20 miles away, which is warmer and lower. That is not much comfort to a motorist stuck in a snowdrift.

There is more to come. When I am trying to assist constituents who are angry and perplexed about the closure of our neighbourhood library, it does not help to learn that Redcar and Cleveland has been awarded less in the environmental and cultural block than any other unitary authority in the former county of Cleveland. Indeed, it receives less than the average for all unitary authorities.

There are other absurdities. A key element in the distribution formula is the number of flats in a local authority area. That means that a borough such as Redcar and Cleveland, in which past generations of town planners, architects and housing specialists avoided the quick fix of building high-rises, and chose traditional terraces—the houses that people wanted—is penalised in comparison with those who took the alternative course.

I would like some of the experts from Eland house to explain why a poor family living in a poorly maintained street-level house is less deserving than a family living in the same circumstances on the third or fourth floor of a block of flats in a neighbouring authority. That is a riddle worth solving. They could explain, too, why the same

formula means that wealthy towns on the sunny south coast can benefit when their stocks of expensive privately rented penthouses and flats are assessed.

Such bizarre examples mean that Redcar and Cleveland, like many authorities, has to spend far more than its SSA if it is to deliver the services that local people demand and deserve. Such councils run slap into the gearing problems that face any authority that spends more than the nominal level. They also face the disbelief of local people, who see the contradiction of common sense presented by a constantly rising council tax combined with cuts in services.

The non-domestic rate has also hit the borough. Despite unemployment, heavy industry is still a pervasive part of the local economy—a pattern of industry which often has an adverse impact on the resident population. To say that is not to be anti-industry, and both the local council and I recognise the vital contribution that our steel and chemical industries make to both the local and the national economy, and we work with them to assist their competitiveness and vitality.

None the less, the council still has to manage the environmental and visual impact, and the effects on the highways, which it does through air pollution monitoring, maintaining a proactive planning department, and constant upkeep of the highway network.

Our local industries are big contributors to the national non-domestic rate pool. The borough collects £41.5 million to pay into that pool, but gets only £35.5 million back. That means that the council exports £6 million to other parts of the country—money which helps to keep down council taxes in other areas, which may be far wealthier than Redcar and Cleveland, and whose local population and local councils would violently resist any thought that their district, too, was a potential site for new large-scale chemical or metal processing plants.

I am pleased that the Environment, Transport and Regional Affairs Committee has recommended that the business rate return to local control and determination. I hope that the Government are considering that idea seriously, and I shall make one practical suggestion that may override the resistance from the local business community.

Local businesses expect services from local authorities, exactly as any house owner or tenant would, so why can the local business rate not be ring-fenced? That could pay for the services from which industry expects to benefit—a good planning service, a good environmental health service, a good highways maintenance programme and a well funded economic development department. Those activities could be wholly or partly underpinned by a local business rate. I do not mean that Redcar and Cleveland, or any council, should expect the Government simply to write out a cheque.

My local authority has been carrying out a modernisation programme. Local councils have set up a full, rigorous process of peer group evaluation. They must accept a full, in-depth and no-holds-barred examination of their systems, procedures and methods of working. They will be expected to show convincingly that they are in touch with the electorate, and that they have built up robust and meaningful partnerships with other actors on the social stage. Their internal methods of political operation must be relevant to today's world, not yesterday's smoke-filled committee rooms.

I have raised many serious issues concerning services and providers. That work must be part of a two-way bargain between central Government and the local council, between Whitehall and Redcar and Cleveland's town hall. I urge my right hon. Friends the Deputy Prime Minister and the Minister for Local Government and Housing to examine carefully the council's financial position. I hope that I will receive support from the Front Bench today.

Thank you, Mr. Deputy Speaker, for allowing me to speak in the Adjournment debate.

10.51 am

Mr. Richard Spring (West Suffolk): Thank you, Mr. Deputy Speaker, for giving me the opportunity to raise the important issue of tourism in Cornwall. Many representations have been made to me about the eclipse that is about to take place and its effect on tourist activity there.

On 11 August, there will be a total eclipse in a corner of Devon and right across Cornwall. The rest of the country, by contrast, will experience only a partial eclipse. This is an important moment in the life of Cornwall and its all-important tourist industry.

The eclipse will take place in the middle of the tourist season, and Cornwall is perhaps more dependent on tourism for its revenues than any other part of the country. Cornwall is less prosperous than the rest of England, measured by gross domestic product per capita or in employment terms—hence its success in obtaining objective 1 status.

Unfortunately, there has been ridiculous and damaging hysteria connected with the eclipse and its effect on tourism, with lurid tales of traffic gridlock, food shortages and overcrowding. In the Adjournment debate secured by the hon. Member for Truro and St. Austell (Mr. Taylor) on 25 November 1998, that was all graphically described. Talk of tourists being fleeced, hordes of journalists and amateur astronomers arriving, and water purification and distribution problems have led to press comment that has been deeply damaging to the crucial tourist industry in the county and for the entire United Kingdom in the run-up to the millennium celebration.

In south-east Cornwall, bookings are down by 30 per cent. so far for the entire season. The Cornwall tourist board has told me that in respect of eclipse bookings to date, the percentage of hotels with accommodation still available are Newquay 60 per cent., Falmouth 16 per cent., Padstow 31 per cent. and Looe 37 per cent.

Speaking on behalf of the self-catering industry, which is vital throughout the United Kingdom, Alice Mumford from Canonstown, near Hayle, described the situation in these terms:

> "Self-catering has been vary badly hit by the hysteria surrounding the eclipse week. The knock-on effect of all this has meant that people are staying away for the whole summer. It has definitely affected us—we are way down on last year—I would say roughly 50 per cent."

Last year, she obtained eight weeks of bookings from advertising in the national press. So far this year, regrettably, she has had none. Incidentally, she lives directly under the path of the eclipse.

On 24 May, *The Times* carried an article about the matter. It told us, for example, how farmers who had set up campsites to cope with hundreds of thousands of

[Mr. Richard Spring]

visitors are now facing huge losses. We already know about the terrible state of agriculture in the UK, which has arisen particularly in the past two years.

The west country has traditionally been a major holiday area. The West Country tourist board tells me that one in six tourists come in August—the very month in which the eclipse will take place. The area's reputation is fully deserved. According to the latest Cornwall holiday survey, 35 per cent. of respondents stated that they were fully satisfied with the provision of tourist services in the county. The tourist industry in Cornwall is in most cases operated by small businesses. They are already suffering from the imposition by the Labour Government, egged on by their Liberal Democrat friends, of a whole raft of job-destroying and additional cost measures, including the working time directive, the part-time workers directive and the parental leave directive. Those impose huge additional burdens on an industry whose umbrella organisation, the English tourist board, has had its marketing function axed by the Government.

The fact is that tourists will not be fleeced in Cornwall. Extensive and comprehensive arrangements have been put in place to minimise any problems that may arise. Such arrangements do not include the crackpot ideas such as visitors road taxes that have apparently been advanced by some local councillors. There is a Cornwall county eclipse planning co-ordinator, Gage Williams, who is heading the contingency arrangements.

The Highways Agency already has a helpline in place. Two million explanatory leaflets are shortly going out to all motorway service centres throughout the country. A comprehensive traffic plan has been devised by the police, Devon and Cornwall county councils, the Highways Agency and the emergency planning services to keep the traffic moving not only in Cornwall, but on the approach to Cornwall during August in particular.

I am told by Steve Winston, the county emergency planning officer, that there will be a test run this weekend. A number of minor diversionary routes will be created with one-way traffic flows at such congestion spots as the village of Dobwalls, to get greater movement along the key A38 arterial route.

The Highways Agency is putting in more CCTV cameras along the A30 and A38 and feeder roads. There will be a contingency centre based in Cornwall, with information fed in from Devon and elsewhere. The information plan extends right up the A5 and beyond. Trafficmasters will help the police control and monitor traffic movements. So-called minutemen will be available at the time of the eclipse to help with possible breakdowns of cars. Electronic signboards will be fully operational. In other words, comprehensive measures are in place for any additional major congestion. If, indeed, the figure of more than a million people in the county in August is realised—almost twice the usual population—the matter looks clearly in hand in contingency planning terms.

Mr. Paul Tyler (North Cornwall): Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Spring: I should like to complete my comments. Cornwall remains one of the great jewels of the British Isles. It would be tragic if the negative comments about the effects of the eclipse damaged the hugely important tourist industry in Cornwall and the rest of the United Kingdom.

Mr. Tyler: I have been listening to the hon. Gentleman's speech outside the Chamber, and I am grateful to him for giving way. Is he aware that the control of the county council is not in the hands of the Liberal Democrats? It is in the hands of an all-party alliance, including members of his own party. The instructions given to the gentleman to whom he referred were given on an all-party basis. I respect the hon. Gentleman's views, but he is making an unworthy speech by making a party point.

Mr. Spring: Clearly, the hon. Gentleman has not been listening to a word that I said. I have made no critical reference to the county council. I have made no critical reference to any Liberal Democrats or anyone else. Clearly, the hon. Gentleman has not been listening to the speech. It is appalling that he should come in and introduce party politics into the matter, which is nothing of the kind. Had the hon. Gentleman been here at the beginning of my remarks, he would have heard me speaking about the concerns that have been expressed about tourism in Cornwall during August because of the eclipse. I very much regret the hon. Gentleman's remarks.

In conclusion, it is about time that a positive message was sent out about Cornwall and the eclipse. It would be good if all hon. Members from Cornwall could help the tourist industry there by projecting a positive image and message, as I have tried to do this morning. That would be welcome to their constituents and the entire country. The message needs to be heard loud and clear.

11 am

Mr. Tam Dalyell (Linlithgow): I should like to express vehement opposition to the proposal to use ground troops in Kosovo. In particular, a substantive motion ought to be debated by the House of Commons before any decision is taken on the matter. It is simply not the case that there is no such precedent, because substantive motions were tabled on the Falklands and Iraq.

My specific question is, how is it proposed to conduct such a campaign? The port of Piraeus will not be available to us, if the mayor of Athens is to be believed, and not a finger will be lifted by any dock worker in that port to transport supplies or personnel to a war in Kosovo. The railwaymen and others of Thessaloniki have made it abundantly clear that that port will not be available for our use. I ask a straight question: is it true, as military pundits have said, that, without the availability of Thessaloniki as a port, it would be impossible to sustain a military engagement in Kosovo for more than a fortnight?

Furthermore, precisely how is it proposed to conduct such a campaign? Macedonia has made it clear that it will not act as a springboard for an offensive against neighbours with whom Macedonians will have to live in the coming centuries. The Hungarians have the problem of 350,000 ethnic Hungarians living in northern Yugoslavia, on whom retribution could be wreaked. As for Albania, what consideration has been given to the inadequate facilities of the port of Durres and to the fact that the roads peter out into dirt tracks near the Kosovo border? Furthermore, there are 6,000 ft high mountains.

Before any decision is made—and if any decision is to be made during the recess, Parliament ought to be recalled—a thorough explanation of what we are up to should be given to the House of Commons. It is entitled to that.

On this day, when India has threatened an air strike against rebel peoples, as it puts it, and has defied Pakistan to interfere, I can remark only that, once people embark on the kind of action on which we have embarked in Yugoslavia, it can be catching. I ask for the Government's reflections on the report of Lieutenant-General Satish Nambiar, the head of mission of the United Nations forces deployed in the former Yugoslavia between 1992 and 1993. He is a former deputy chief of staff of the Indian army and is currently director of the United Services Institution of India.

Lieutenant-General Nambiar says:

"My year long experience as the Force Commander and Head of Mission of the United Nations Forces deployed in the former Yugoslavia has given me an understanding of the fatal flaws of US/NATO policies in the troubled region. It was obvious to most people following the events in the Balkans since the beginning of the decade, and particularly after the fighting that resulted in the emergence of Slovenia, Croatia, Bosnia-Herzegovina and the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia, that Kosovo was a 'powder keg' waiting to explode. The West appears to have learnt all the wrong lessons from the previous wars and applied it to Kosovo."

Lieutenant-General Nambiar makes four points. First, he says:

"Portraying the Serbs as evil and everybody else as good was not only counterproductive but also dishonest. According to my experience all sides were guilty but only the Serbs would admit that they were no angels while the others would insist that they were. With 28,000 forces under me and with constant contacts with UNHCR and the International Red Cross officials, we did not witness any genocide beyond killings and massacres on all sides that are typical of such conflict conditions. I believe none of my successors and their forces saw anything on the scale claimed by the media."

I should like to hear a comment on that.

Lieutenant-General Nambiar's second point is that it

"was obvious to me that if Slovenians, Croatians and Bosnians had the right to secede from Yugoslavia, then the Serbs of Croatia and Bosnia had an equal right to secede. The experience of partitions in Ireland and India has not been pleasant but in the Yugoslavia case, the state had already been taken apart anyway. It made little sense to me that if multiethnic Yugoslavia was not tenable that multiethnic Bosnia could be made tenable. The former internal boundaries of Yugoslavia which had no validity under international law should have been redrawn when it was taken apart by the West, just as it was in the case of Ireland in 1921 and Punjab and Bengal in India in 1947. Failure to acknowledge this has led to the problem of Kosovo as an integral part of Serbia."

Lieutenant-General Nambiar's third point is that it

"is ironic that the Dayton Agreement on Bosnia was not fundamentally different from the Lisbon Plan drawn up by Portuguese Foreign Minister Cutilheiro and the British representative Lord Carrington to which all three sides had agreed before any killings had taken place, or even the Vance-Owen Plan which Karadzic was willing to sign. One of the main problems was that there was an unwillingness on the part of the American administration to concede that Serbs had legitimate grievances and rights. I recall State Department official George Kenny turning up like all other American officials, spewing condemnations of the Serbs for aggression and genocide. I offered to give him an escort and to go see for himself that none of what he proclaimed was true. He accepted my offer and thereafter he made a radical turnaround. Other Americans continued to see and hear what they wanted to see and hear from one side, while ignoring the other side. Such behaviour does not produce peace but more conflict."

Lieutenant-General Nambiar makes a final point. He says:

"I felt that Yugoslavia was a media-generated tragedy. The Western media sees international crises in black and white, sensationalizing incidents for public consumption. From what I can see now, all Serbs have been driven out of Croatia and the Muslim-Croat Federation, I believe almost 850,000 of them. And yet the focus is on 500,000 Albanians (at last count) who have been driven out of Kosovo. Western policies have led to an ethnically pure Greater Croatia, and an ethnically pure Muslim statelet in Bosnia. Therefore, why not an ethnically pure Serbia? Failure to address these double standards has led to the current one."

The Indian view—that of a man who had first-hand experience—at least ought to be reflected on before we embark on the folly of starting a ground war, the result of which can be known to none of us.

11.8 am

Mr. David Amess (Southend, West): I wish to raise a number of points before the House adjourns for the Whitsun recess, but first I want to congratulate the Parliamentary Secretary, Privy Council Office. Following our previous debate—and unlike some Ministers who say that they will write to hon. Members, although we never hear from them—he wrote to me on every subject. I am grateful for that and if he does the same again this time, I should be delighted. However, I should be grateful if he tried to get some information on the final point that I shall raise.

I enjoy the history and tradition of this place, although that enjoyment is not shared by everyone, and I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for South Staffordshire (Sir P. Cormack) on organising the banquet which will celebrate the 900th anniversary of Westminster Hall. The first recorded great event held there was the Whitsuntide banquet of 1099, which was attended by William II, who was known as William Rufus. I understand that the event has been organised by the all-party arts and heritage group. It is a wonderful idea. There has not been a banquet in the hall since the coronation of George IV in 1821, although a lunch was served there for the Queen shortly after her coronation.

It is in that connection that I take this opportunity to say that the House's decision on Monday to devalue this Chamber further was a disaster. I stood in despair as I watched hon. Members vote. I am totally opposed to what has been proposed. Some people patronisingly remind me of what was said about Select Committees. However, in the same way that I believe that the decision to televise our proceedings was disastrous and devalued this place, I think that it is utterly ridiculous to have a second Chamber. The House will come to regret it.

On the same patriotic note, and given the way in which the United Kingdom has been broken up, increasingly I think that St. George's day—a subject that in some respects is a little controversial—should become a national holiday.

The Minister will not be surprised by my second point. It concerns the Palace theatre in Westcliff-on-Sea, about which I am sure that the House awaits a report. Sadly, it is still closed. I and my constituents are not at all happy about that. When I telephoned the theatre's support group, I was told that the theatre's board has been seeking bids to run the theatre, either as a package or in small, franchised pieces. The latter option would involve, for example, running the bar as a separate business.

[Mr. David Amess]

Apparently, the decision is to go for one company to run the lot. Several companies have been spoken to, and an announcement of which will run the theatre will be made. However, the support group feels that time to organise the Christmas pantomime—which I understand will be entitled "The Labour Government Since 1 May 1997"—is running short. However, lottery officials are to visit my constituency, and all interested parties can turn up to find out whether extra money will be available. I hope that I will soon be able to report that the Palace theatre has reopened.

My third point concerns the organisation representing the combined Irish regiments. At my last constituency surgery, a very important person in that organisation came to see me. I shall not name him, as he does not want any publicity, but the April edition of that organisation's journal stated:

"The M.O.D. has decided to seek the sale of the Duke of York's Headquarters which is government property and . . . within a year or two the Regiment's period here, begun in 1912, may come to an end."

It adds that the council of the royal borough of Kensington and Chelsea—"and others"—is entirely opposed to the sale. I have received a letter stating that

"this unique and historic Headquarters is home to a number of famous London Territorial Army Units, some of which have been there since the turn of the century, and have gone off to Two World Wars from there.

To allow the site to be sold, just to realise"—

money—

"from commercial developers, would be an act of extreme folly and would deal a tremendous blow to the morale of the Territorial Army. The start-up costs of transferring Units out of the Headquarters to smaller, overcrowded premises should be seriously considered and this move out will certainly have a serious effect on the recruiting and retention of TA soldiers."

This is a serious matter. I am horrified to learn that, so far, two rooms in north London have been offered as a replacement for the headquarters. We owe a great debt of gratitude to those soldiers. I know that the Government are trying to save money, by redeploying forces and selling off property, but this treatment is appalling. I hope that the Government will do something about the problem. If they cannot, perhaps a wealthy benefactor exists locally who will save the property.

My fourth point has to do with the Consumers Association. At a splendid reception here, the association's key message was that the

"right to secure adequate redress in cases of maladministration or inadequate service provision has long been regarded as a key consumer principle."

As Members of Parliament, we are used to people coming to us with all manner of complaints. I naively hoped that the citizens charter would be a cheap way to get redress for such complaints, as it costs a huge amount of money to have recourse to law. People groan when the working classes are mentioned, but the question of redress is very important for those on low incomes. They want to know to whom they can complain when discussions with the supplier, institution or body involved fail.

I support the Consumers Association, which considers that a comprehensive list should be available to the general public that would include the names of the relevant ombudsmen. Such a list should be available in post offices, libraries, local authority offices and so on. To their credit, many companies already give such information to customers, but not all do. All utilities and public services should be included in such a list. The feedback would benefit consumers and suppliers, and reduce considerably the work load of Members of Parliament. Technically, after 1 May 1997, hon. Members have been very enthusiastic about being here, but now it seems that they cannot wait to get away.

My fifth point concerns the disabled. I shall speak not about the shambles on the Government Benches last week that led to the Government's majority being reduced to 40, but about the problems caused by the requirement for medical examinations. I am sick to death of people who are clearly unwell coming to my surgery and complaining about the medicals that they have to undergo. They are humiliated by the experience, and often lose their benefits.

I am not a doctor—there are any number of doctors among all the other experts in the House—but any fool could see that the people who come to me are unfit and clearly suffer from a range of disabilities, such as ME. They are not fiddling the benefits system.

Mr. David Hanson (Delyn): The Conservative Government set up the system.

Mr. Amess: The Government Whip, from a sedentary position, says that the previous Conservative Government are to blame, but, for more than two years, we have had a Labour Government who said that everything would be different. If the Government do not like the present system, they can forget all that hogwash about working with the amounts of money already committed and change the system.

My constituents believe that the Government are trying to save money by reducing benefits to the disabled. I am beginning to think that they are right. I am not at all happy that, when my anxious constituents undergo a so-called medical—from doctors whom I shall not name—which at best is perfunctory, they then stand to lose all their benefits at the subsequent tribunal. I hope that the Minister will try to do something to help, as my constituents are not trying to con money out of the system.

My final point is really urgent, and I hope that the Minister will try to respond to it. Yesterday, a distressed constituent, Mrs. Kim Ansell, telephoned my office. Her husband, Barry Swain, a self-employed lorry driver, owns his own truck and at present is in prison in France, awaiting a hearing on 28 May. Barry and Mrs. Ansell took the truck to Lille two weeks ago, acting on behalf of a shipping company for which they usually drive. The company had asked them to pick up the trailer and load of another trucker who had been arrested. The trailer was at the Lille police station.

When they arrived, they were led into the back of the police station. Unbelievably, Mrs. Ansell was stripped and intimately searched by a young female student in front of two male officers. Her husband Barry was not stripped or searched. Both were questioned at intervals of three hours. They were told that the police were looking for stolen or forged credit cards. I know that there are always two sides to a story, but I have not had time to get the other side. I hope that the Minister will do that.

As a result of the investigations, Mr. Swain is being held in prison. Mrs. Ansell was released, and is now back in England. Her husband Barry has not been arrested but

is being held. She has not seen him since, and she has not been allowed to speak to him by telephone. She has been told that if she wants to go to France to visit her husband she must send her passport, birth and marriage certificates to France, which will be reviewed by the judge dealing with the case, Judge Madame Stella, who will decide whether she can see him. This is the Common Market for goodness sake.

While Mr. Swain and Mrs. Ansell were being questioned, they were told that a number of drivers are being held on remand in France in connection with credit card fraud, and that one of them had named Mr. Swain as being involved. They were shown photographs, but neither of them had seen any of the men before. Barry was not found to have credit cards on his person; nor was he on any security film with credit cards. They were told that the main culprit had been arrested in England on six charges, but was out on bail and had gone to France and was arrested. I do not think that I should name that person.

Mrs. Ansell was upset about the nature of the questioning. The subject of the death of her son was raised. He died in Scotland some years ago, and she wonders how the police knew about that. The main point that I should like the Minister kindly to help with is the length of time it took the British consul to visit Mr. Swain and the lack of legal representation. Mrs. Ansell contacted the consul on 17 May and was told that she would have to get an appointment for the visit. The consul still has not seen Mr. Swain, but apparently may visit him on 27 May.

This is a serious matter, and I should be very grateful if, before the House adjourns, the Minister could get some help for my constituent.

11.22 am

Mr. Harry Barnes (North-East Derbyshire): These Adjournment debates are popularly referred to as consisting of short speeches, so I shall keep my contribution brief. I have three items to raise.

First, constituents are facing problems obtaining passports. We are coming to the recess, and some hon. Members may be lucky enough to be popping overseas for a short while. Many of our constituents are having considerable problems obtaining passports so that they can go on holiday. My constituents use the Liverpool passport office, and it is claimed that passports are sometimes sent out but have not been received, so duplicate copies must be sent and that involves much organisation. Some constituents have waited 10 weeks or more: their cheques have been cashed, but they have not received their passports. There is a last-minute panic, and finally the matter is brought to the attention of their Member of Parliament and arrangements must be made so that those constituents can obtain passports.

People can obtain a passport quickly by going to a post office and paying £3.20 under what is termed a partnership scheme. Whether there should be such a scheme when the general waiting list for passports is not moving is debatable, but such a system should be operated properly.

I had a case of constituents who made use of the post office facility on 28 April. As it is supposed to take 10 days to receive a passport, they should have received theirs on 8 May. They had not received them by 19 May and were due to leave for their holiday on 20 May. When the chief executive's office of the UK Passport Agency was contacted, arrangements were made to post the passports that day so that my constituents would receive them in time to go on holiday. A check was made of whether they had received them. They had not, so a courier had to be sent from Liverpool to north-east Derbyshire. The courier left late, and arrangements were made by telephone that one of the relatives of the people concerned would go to junction 29 of the motorway to meet the courier. Meanwhile, a taxi was waiting to take my constituents to the airport. They managed it, but that shows the serious state of affairs.

I dealt with another case yesterday. I contacted the chief executive's office, and was told that it was also having difficulty contacting the Liverpool passport office and was obliged to send material by fax. We are checking whether the people concerned receive their passports in time. This is a serious matter, and needs to be dealt with, given that the recess is approaching. I hope that the appropriate Department will take my comments on board, and that improvements will be made so that constituents are not placed in that position.

The second problem that I want to mention concerns an issue that I have already raised in another Adjournment debate. It is about the payment of jobseeker's allowance when a firm goes into receivership. This matter was brought to my attention by the collapse on 22 April of Bryan Donkin Foundry Limited at Renishaw in my constituency. So far, 160 out of a work force of 180 have been sacked. They were entitled to moneys from their ex-employer when the receivers moved in, but must wait for the redundancy arrangements to be worked out. According to a parliamentary answer that process takes nine weeks on average.

In the meantime, those sacked workers are not entitled to jobseeker's allowance and must be dealt with through income support, which is means-tested. They are from my constituency or neighbouring areas. Out of the 160, only 10 per cent. or so receive income support, because other income coming into the family is taken into account. In one case, the claimant does not receive any payment because of his wife's disability benefit.

The Government are well aware of this problem. I wrote to the Department for Education and Employment immediately, and I raised the matter in an Adjournment debate. I received a letter from the Minister for Employment, Welfare to Work and Equal Opportunities, which says:

> "As things stand . . . any notice payment due must be taken into account in calculating JSA during the notice period, even though it has not yet been actually paid. The Department of Social Security, rather than this Department, have the lead responsibility for this area of JSA policy. They are considering the matter in conjunction with DTI, but I understand that the issues involved are proving complex."

I am not sure what the great complexities are, but this matter requires three Departments to co-ordinate their activities.

Mr. Stunell: Does the hon. Gentleman agree that the injustice is even greater, because the longer the individual's service with the firm and the greater the redundancy payment, the longer he will be denied support from the state system?

Mr. Barnes: As the average period to sort out the redundancy payment is nine weeks, and the payment

[Mr. Barnes]

depends on the number of years of service, the people who have waited nine weeks or more are the most seriously affected by this problem.

The Minister's letter goes on to say:

"There are also practical difficulties—for example, surrounding the early identification of whether or not an employer is insolvent."

A distinction is made between a firm that goes into receivership, which is the case with Bryan Donkin, and one that becomes insolvent. The letter also says:

"DSS are unable to say when the work will be completed, but I am assured that efforts are being made to conclude the matter as quickly as possible."

If the relevant period is nine weeks, my constituents are halfway through it. I hope that the matter will be resolved in time, but it seems obvious to me that it will not be, and I feel that something must be done on my constituents' behalf.

Finally, I want to say something about Yugoslavia and the NATO bombing. I have always supported the bombing of military targets, and I accept that some civilians are bound to be caught up in that and that there will be unfortunate accidents. However, I feel that the number of civilians who are being killed and injured, and whose lives are being disrupted in what is allegedly not an all-out war, is excessive, as is the number of errors. Mary Robinson, the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, has argued in favour of proportionality, and I think that what she says should be seriously considered.

It should be possible to make a reasonable distinction between military and civilian targets. Military targets are military hardware and troops; civilian targets—which, obviously, should be avoided—include schools, hospitals, health care centres, housing estates, monasteries and religious shrines. A number of those have been hit, it is claimed by accident. But in which class should we place bridges, railway stations, civilian airports, public institutions, factories, agricultural complexes and telecommunications facilities? Some of those might be said to have military links, but most are basically civilian, and often civilians will be hurt the most when they are attacked. In a number of cases, civilians are being hit while military targets are merely suffering collateral damage.

The NATO high command strikes me as both inept—in terms of the number of accidents that have occurred, and to which it has admitted—and cavalier in its attempt to distinguish between civilian military targets. I hope that our Government will take account of the pressure on NATO to stick to what a number of us signed up to at the outset: an attack on military targets, rather than on the Yugoslavian population.

11.33 am

Mr. Tim Loughton (East Worthing and Shoreham): I fear that I cannot emulate the grand tour of Southend, West to which my hon. Friend the Member for Southend, West (Mr. Amess) treated us earlier, as he customarily does. I shall limit myself to a single subject.

I am pleased to bring the House what I consider to be very good news of an excellent project in my constituency called First Check Point, which is proving to be dramatically successful in combating the menace of cowboy builders. That is entirely due to the tremendous work of one Mrs. Hazel Jones, who set up the project and initially ran it almost single-handed.

I am sure that all hon. Members will have dealt with constituency cases involving cowboy builders. Home owners are told that a job urgently needs to be done before further costly damage is caused; builders turn up, invited or uninvited; the resulting charges may bear no relation to the cost of the job, or the time that it takes. Elderly people in particular are faced with myriad quotations for larger jobs especially, having no idea what the cost should be or how well qualified the workman who takes on the labour will prove to be.

Some unscrupulous builders take deposits and then abscond. Smaller jobs that would not be profitable for reputable traders are not taken on, and the home owner is left to the mercy of smaller, less scrupulous traders. When doing one job, a builder may create faults that require a second, more expensive job. Builders may start the work although their quotation has not been accepted, or they may make the job out to be much bigger than it is by not doing the minimum work required to deal with the problem. They may take on work that is beyond their capabilities, or they may do the work in a hurry, which results in a poor standard of workmanship. Some use the wrong materials in order to save costs; others may have too many projects on the go at the same time and consequently move from one job to another, spending only a short time on each and disrupting the householder for far longer than is necessary. Such cases lead to what Mrs. Jones describes as "builderphobia".

Let me give some examples from my constituency. A female householder who heard water running in her loft telephoned a plumber—a member of the Confederation of Registered Gas Installers—whose name she had found in *Yellow Pages*. The plumber visited the attic, and reported that the whole system needed replacing—and that if the householder did not have the work done, she would be replacing the ceilings. The price quoted was some £800. A CORGI-registered plumber from First Check Point then visited, and found that all that was required was replacement of the ballcock at a cost of £35, which meant a saving of £765.

An elderly female householder needed the rotten woodwork around her garage door replacing. She asked for two quotations: one was for £2,340, and the other for £1,430. Both included the cost of replacing the whole garage roof. First Check Point sent a surveyor, who found that all that needed to be replaced was the woodwork surrounding the garage door and the lead flashing above it. The roof was not damaged in any way, and no part of it was leaking. The quotations were for £595 and £650 respectively. I am sure that hon. Members could give many other examples.

I know that the Government are aware of the problem. Last year the Department of Trade and Industry produced a welcome consultation paper entitled "Combating Cowboy Builders", and various working parties are taking action. First Check Point, however, has already achieved dramatic results.

A year ago, a little lady in her 60s came to my surgery. She had a curious mid-Atlantic accent, and wore a large fur coat. Her name was Hazel Jones. She brought with her many ideas from the United States, where she had spent

a lot of time in industry and the voluntary sector, working on federal housing projects with, in particular, elderly people. She said that she needed mental stimulation, and something to keep her busy.

Subsequently, last October, Hazel Jones, the mayor of Worthing and I—along with others—launched First Check Point. It was initially funded by Hazel herself and a local builder, who was keen to help because cowboy builders give the reputable trade a bad name. The project was tied in with local voluntary organisations and the police. A team of retired volunteers manned the telephones in the office to which part of Mrs. Jones's house had been converted, and a team of semi-retired professionals came on board to give quotations and assess what work needed to be done.

First Check Point works like this. Someone needing a job, big or small, to be done telephones the organisation. An approved volunteer—all those involved have at least 40 years' building experience—visits the property, lists the items of work that need to be done and specifies the type of trader who will be required. There is then a choice of two schemes. For small jobs, there is the approved handyman scheme, involving a list of skilled tradesmen, usually semi-retired, who want the odd one or two days' work a week. They are closely vetted. They must prove that they live locally, they must have at least three references in relation to jobs done in the past, and they must have no police record. The work is awarded on the basis that they have indemnity insurance of at least £1 million. Those smaller jobs may be electrical or they may involve plumbing, roofing or carpentry.

Larger jobs are dealt with through the approved trader scheme, which involves a list of approved local traders with proven track records and references from people who are prepared to guarantee their work. Two or three appropriate tradesmen will be asked to give quotations, all of which must be itemised and signed by both builder and householder.

Both lists are reviewed regularly, and householders who have had a job done are required to answer a questionnaire about the quality of the workmanship. First Check Point will monitor the work to ensure that it is done properly; if it is not, First Check Point will bring back the builder to ensure that it is done to the required standard.

The scheme was originally funded voluntarily, with help from Worthing council grants and charities such as New Horizons—which was so impressed by the quality of the scheme that it doubled its initial donation. Following the mushrooming of the scheme, First Check Point now levies a 5 per cent. commission on approved tradesmen, and a commission of £5 per day of work on approved handymen. There are no direct costs to the customer.

I mention the scheme because it has been spectacularly successful. Earlier in the month, we reached the mark of 1,000 jobs done since 1 January: in the space of just four months, more than 1,000 people have been helped with jobs. There has been a torrent of thank you letters, and letters of congratulation saying, "I do not know how anyone could go to *Yellow Pages* or any other local trading body without coming to you first because the scheme is so successful."

The scheme now covers the area from Brighton to Littlehampton and is under great pressure to expand. Age Concern is sending some of its national officers to consider the scheme seriously, with a view to helping to establish pilot schemes in other parts of the country. The National Neighbourhood Watch Association is coming on board because First Check Point is a useful scheme to combat crime as well. It could deter unscrupulous traders who knock on the doors of little old ladies to offer their services, but who may have ulterior motives. The local neighbourhood watch has been helping to distribute window stickers that are based on neighbourhood watch window stickers, but which have First Check Point on them, thereby deterring cowboy builders from trying to take advantage of people who need work to be done.

I said earlier that the Government's work on cowboy builders is welcome, but the consultation paper addresses only the quality of the builders' workmanship. It deals only with national projects, but the success of First Check Point has been the local supervision and the local factor: the capacity of local people to monitor the standard of the work and to award a sort of kite mark. In addition, the national lists proposed in the consultation on cowboy builders would not include the small firm—the two or three-person family firms that are the lifeblood of First Check Point.

First Check Point works very well. It works largely because of the absolute dedication of Mrs. Hazel Jones and the people who work with her, such as Norman Tilley, who has been on board from the start. They would be the first to admit that it is not perfect, but it is simple, it addresses the problems that have been experienced and gives the public, particularly the elderly, someone to turn to for objective advice.

The scheme is self-funding; it does not rely on any public money. Its purpose is also preventive because it aims to stop problems happening in the first place, rather than to solve them once they have occurred.

I hope that, by my mentioning the project today, other hon. Members may gain something from the experiences of what is a simple, but effective scheme for their own constituencies. I should be happy to provide information. However, I fear that, if they are looking to set up a similar scheme in their constituency, many will be hard pressed to find their own version of Mrs. Hazel Jones.

11.43 am

Ms Julia Drown (South Swindon): I take this opportunity to add my support to hon. Members who have voiced their support for the building society sector. The continuing mutual status of building societies is an essential part of retaining competition in the financial services sector. It is vital for savers and investors that we continue to have competition in that sector.

The other issue that I should like to raise has not been raised yet, but dominates my postbag: the technology of genetic modification and its impact on the safety of food and the environment. The Government's announcement just last week of measures to make the vetting and monitoring processes for genetically modified foods even more rigorous are welcome, but more needs to be done to reassure the public continually and to make them feel confident about the Government's approach.

My constituents may raise the issue more than others because we have a GM crop trial site in a neighbouring constituency, which understandably raises the profile of the issue. Many of my constituents have written to me

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about their concerns on both the local and national situations. They want to be assured that their health and the environment are protected.

My constituents want to be sure that trials are taking place scientifically, with a proper base line of information established. They want monitoring of all the environmental implications—for example, how bees carrying the crop for miles will affect other crops—and of what happens to scatterings of the crop as it is carried on trucks in and out of the area.

My constituents are naturally uncertain about the implications of such a site because the information that they receive via the press is not consistent. While the Government seek to allay concerns and, rightly, to play down some of the more scaremongering claims, they and the companies involved are not yet taking on all the justified concerns from our constituents, many of which are backed by scientific experts who contest the Government's and companies' statements of reassurance.

I accept that many of the discussions in the sector are technical, but that should not be an excuse for blinding the public with science. It is part of scientists' job to make their results understandable to lay people, particularly when so many may be affected by them, as in the case of GM crops. We do not need to be drowned in detail to get to the important issues around GM crops. However, the complexity may mean that we need more time to debate the matter when we return after the break.

I recognise that a major problem in the sector is that no one can make categorical claims for or against the safety of GM crops and foods because, at this stage, no one really knows. We also need to recognise that, even when more information is available, we will still be unable to expect categorical claims either proving or disproving the safety of GM foods. We will instead be faced with probabilities and risk assessments.

For example, we will be told that X per cent. of a GM crop will be blown Y metres beyond the field boundary in normal winds and that more severe winds will carry crops further. We will be told to expect that, in so many years of a century, there will be those more severe winds; so I accept that categorical claims, one way or another, will be difficult.

I can see that Ministers want to be able to say that GM crops are totally safe, but they cannot and they recognise that. They have referred to "justified concerns" about GM crops and to the "risk of cross-pollination". They have even acknowledged

"a small, but finite, chance that unprocessed maize as an animal feed stuff could lead to a transfer of antibiotic resistance."

They have recognised also that

"a number of research studies have indicated potential interference with ecological systems from GM crops, with varying degrees of permanence".

Those responses accept the lack of certainty and the current gaps in knowledge, yet that lack of certainty does not always come across to the public.

My constituents tend to think that the Government have not accepted that lack of certainty. They believe that the Government have no concerns whatever about the safety and impact of GM organisms. The inconsistency in messages being received will have to be resolved if the public are to gain confidence in the Government's stance on what is an important issue.

I need to stress that it is not only an issue of responsibility for the Government. The companies involved also need to take consumers' views more seriously. In the case of the trial site in my neighbouring constituency, the press notices did not go out in the local paper until after the seeds had been planted. Companies will need to do much better than that if they are to gain the confidence of consumers.

I suggest a number of ways in which the Government should be reviewing and refining their approach to GM crops and foods. First, they need to convince the public, as they have done with the risks of BSE—bovine spongiform encephalopathy—that, if there is even the smallest doubt about the safety of GM technology and its possible long-term consequences, steps will be taken to protect the public and our environment, whatever the cost in terms of a reduced contribution by biotechnology companies to the United Kingdom economy.

Secondly, there is the question of why and whether we need GM foods at all. That simple question does not seem to feature enough in debates on the GM issue. Where is the evidence that it is impractical to use traditional crops or organic farming methods to meet food needs in future?

Some proponents of GM technology say that GM crops will help the environment by reducing the use of pesticides. However, some GM crops would encourage the use of pesticides. Encouraging organic agriculture, rather than GM agriculture, would much more directly and reliably address the problem of the over-use of pesticides.

Although the Government have greatly increased support for organic farming, yet more could be done. Last year, they spent £1.7 million on research into organic farming, but £52 million on agricultural biotechnology research. An adjustment in that ratio could have a huge impact on organic farming.

I have in my constituency one of the most successful organic farms in England. Its success shows that there is a clear and increasing market for organic food. Organic food is sometimes described as a niche market; but on current attitudes, it seems more likely than GM food to become a mainstream market.

Organic farms are also more labour intensive, employing more people, and thereby meeting another Government objective. Therefore, surely development of organic food should be a higher priority than development of GM food.

I realise that some GM food farmers and companies assert that, in time, GM foods will be accepted, particularly once they bring food prices down. Currently, however, consumers seem equally concerned about the risks of GM foods. In short, the public are not yet convinced of the need for GM foods.

Thirdly, we should consider the wider benefits that GM technology may bring to health care. Undoubtedly, the technology has huge potential in the health sphere. We may have to understand more about GM technology in plants before we are able to understand how it will affect animals and humans. However, that is not a justification for planting GM crops; it is a justification for continuing genetic research in laboratories.

Fourthly, the Government could allay public concerns and ensure properly conducted development—if there is to be development—of GM crops by addressing the issue

of GM trial site management. Currently, neither the Government nor the companies involved clearly state the objectives of each trial, or what results will lead to what actions.

I should like to be able to assure my constituents that if, for example, it is demonstrated at a trial site that the local bird population has decreased by a certain proportion, we shall not allow commercial planting of that GM crop. Such a criterion would give the public the type of assurance that they need. They could watch the trials being openly assessed against predefined criteria.

Fifthly, in addressing many of the issues of GM crops, we have to work with our partners in Europe, and lead our European partners in ensuring that we all take a cautious approach to the matter. European Community directive 90/220/EEC is clearly a matter of concern, as it provides that once a GM crop receives marketing consent under the directive, the consent will apply across all member states, and there will be no automatic requirement to notify the authorities either of where the crop is grown or of the size of the area covered.

I hope that our Government will be urging reform of the directive, so that—in the interests of freedom of information, transparency and accountability—the relevant authorities will have to be notified in advance of plans to grow GM crops commercially in a given area.

The directive makes the European Economic Community sound as if it is very much in favour of GM foods—but that line is not taken by all its members. The Greek Government have informally called for a Europewide moratorium on planting GM crops, but that call has not received support. However, rumour has it that, at the European Environment Council on 24 June, the Greek Government will again state their wish for a Europewide moratorium—thereby providing another reason why more British parliamentary time should be set aside to discuss the issues.

I am sure that many of our parliamentarians would like to try to influence the British position on the proposal. Many of my constituents favour the Government supporting such a moratorium until more information on GM crops is available.

Sixthly, the Government have to tackle very directly the fears about antibiotic marker genes. Sir Robert May, chief scientific adviser to the Government, has stated:

"Often marker genes in GM plants are antibiotic resistant, so that there is a risk that humans could acquire these antibiotic genes from their food, thus accelerating the already existing, and very troublesome, world problem of increasing resistance to today's antibiotics".

The European Parliament has been very helpful on the issue, approving an amendment to the EEC directive on GM organisms, which states that GMOs

"must not contain any antibiotic-resistant genes or traces of toxic or pathogenic substances".

However, the amended directive will not take effect unless it is adopted by member Governments.

Austria and Luxembourg have both imposed bans on an antibiotic-resistant gene crop. Our Government should ban all GM organisms that have been modified to have antibiotic-resistant genes or traces of toxic or pathogenic substances.

We have made significant progress on labelling—particularly by contrast with the previous Government's complete inertia on the matter. However, there are still concerns. Products containing GM derivatives, and products that were processed with GM ingredients but do not ultimately contain those ingredients, are not necessarily labelled as GM products. However, consumers who object to GM technology should be able to choose not to buy or support the manufacture of those products.

The absence of labelling on GM animal feed is another concern, which is reminiscent of farmers' worries over BSE. If we are truly to uphold and safeguard consumer choice, labelling must be comprehensive.

The Government could encourage developing countries that wish to be entirely free of GM crops to become so, thereby ensuring greater consumer choice. Such a decision could be a real bonus for those countries, and ensure that they not only have a market for their products, but benefit British consumers.

Segregation is the final issue. Although segregation may incur extra costs, those costs are a consequence of the new technology. The cost of segregation should, therefore, be placed on the costs of GM foods themselves. If segregation makes GM foods too expensive, we shall again have to ask why the products are being produced.

I should like the Government to investigate how we might ensure that companies promoting GM technology take full responsibility for any future health or environmental damage caused by GM foods. Although I realise that that may raise even more issues, it also demonstrates the need for more parliamentary time to be allocated to debate this important subject.

11.56 am

Mr. John Wilkinson (Ruislip-Northwood): The situation in the Balkans is so dire, and the suffering of the Kosovars so abject, that I hope that you, Mr. Deputy Speaker, will forgive me for raising issues that have I raised before, in debates on 19 April and 18 May.

In the first debate, I said:

"This is not a phoney war. I use the word 'war' advisedly although the Foreign Secretary does not like it. It is certainly a war for the people of Kosovo, Albania, Macedonia, Montenegro and Serbia and for the aircrew of the Royal Air Force and Royal Navy, who have now joined the conflict."—[*Official Report*, 19 April 1999; Vol. 329, c. 635.]

I said then, and say again, that a declared state of war is important to ensure that our aircrew have the protection of the Geneva convention if they are taken prisoner. I made it clear then, and make it clear again today, that I support the air campaign as a necessary prerequisite for the liberation of Kosovo from the occupying Serb forces. But the Government really must ensure that their war aims are clearly defined and spelled out properly, both to the House and to the British public.

During the Falklands war, I was the parliamentary private secretary to the Secretary of State for Defence, and I recall how assiduous John Nott was in making statements to the House at every stage of the conflict, even late at night, and even when the news was at its worst. Perhaps it was even more necessary that the news should be broken early if it was bad, when a ship went down or some other disaster befell our forces, so that their morale, and that of the British public, should be sustained.

I recall, too, the totally trustworthy Mr. McDonald of the Ministry of Defence, who was almost daily on our television screens, informing the British public of the objectives of the Royal Navy and Royal Air Force and of

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the sorties flown, the numbers of Argentine and British aircraft shot down, the outcome of naval engagements at sea, and the progress of the land campaign as it yomped its arduous way towards Port Stanley. There were no concessions to sentimentality, and no regrets about what was being done, but only a determination to win which was continually communicated to the British public. We shall need their full support in the very difficult days ahead.

By contrast, the NATO spokesman, Mr. Shea, seems always to be in apologetic mode, coming on television screens to apologise for the sad bombing errors committed, but never emphasising sufficiently the undoubted successes of our British armed forces and NATO forces—successes which outnumber the tragic errors.

I should add that it would be helpful if the Ministry of Defence had senior Royal Air Force officers, preferably with recent operational experience, as spokesmen while the air war predominates, to explain the capabilities and limitations of modern airborne weapons systems, and to demonstrate the effectiveness of the air offensive as the essential prerequisite to the physical removal of Serb forces from Kosovo. Once troops are inserted into the province of Kosovo, the spokesmen should be from the Army, but, for the time being, the British public need a better explanation of the air war.

Today, NATO is due to increase its military deployment in Macedonia and Albania by one third, to 48,000. How I wish that we had more Gurkhas, more paratroops, more reserves and more helicopters, but we are going to have to make do with what we have. We have to win. Military men understand that only infantry can hold ground. Kosovo is difficult territory for armour and a multitude of helicopters will be required. The military appreciate the challenges ahead of air supply and fighting off the partisan attacks for which the Yugoslav army has trained assiduously for two generations. So effective was that training that the USSR was dissuaded from invading Yugoslavia while Tito was in power. To this day, we have kept Russia out of the Balkans.

NATO needs all the friends it can get to take the war to the enemy. That must mean the establishment of a NATO military mission to the Kosovo Liberation Army. In the April debate, I also advocated the arming and training of the KLA.

Beyond the victory that NATO must achieve if Montenegro, Macedonia, Bosnia-Herzegovina and Croatia are to be safe from Serbian aggression, NATO must win the peace. A messy, inglorious compromise would be a recipe for further conflict—hence the need for clear political aims. They should not be dictated by Russia, which we have always successfully kept out of the Balkans, or by a desire to appease the pusillanimous tendencies of the weakest members of the NATO alliance. They should be decided by the Kosovar people, freely expressing their sovereign political will entirely democratically through the exercise of a universal adult franchise via the ballot box.

Regrettably, Her Majesty's Government have set their face against self-determination for Kosovo. I recognise that the human rights of the Serb minority will have to be safeguarded in Kosovo, but the Yugoslav federation as a legitimate polity is dead and should not be resurrected by NATO. Its disintegration is by no means complete, but the establishment of a free, democratic, independent Kosovo is the first step towards a better system of security for the Balkans. Beyond that, perhaps the secession and full independence of Montenegro might ensue.

I urge the Government to explain at every stage the clear objectives for which this bloody and difficult war is being fought. It is the vilest conflict that we have known in our continent since the second world war. It will get harder rather than easier. I hope that we have the courage to see it through. The Kosovars deserve nothing less. They have suffered enough already.

12.4 pm

Sir Patrick Cormack (South Staffordshire): We have had 14 speeches since 9.30 am and the debate has lived up to the tradition of recess Adjournment debates. Perhaps the House will forgive me if I begin by referring to someone who is not here. I have missed seeing the hon. Member for Bolsover (Mr. Skinner) in his accustomed place. I have attended most of these Adjournment debates over the past 29 years and have replied to every one over the past two years. On almost every occasion, the hon. Gentleman has been present and has frequently taken part in his inimitable way. I am sure that the hon. Member for North-East Derbyshire (Mr. Barnes) will convey the greetings of the House to his hon. Friend, whom we hope to see back in full health and vigour after the recess.

The debate began with the hon. Member for Bassetlaw (Mr. Ashton), who is a great authority on football. He talked about a subject on which I have no personal expertise—the issuing of permits for foreign footballers to play in this country. He seemed to make a powerful, logical plea and I hope that Ministers in the Department for Education and Employment will respond positively. However, I could not help feeling a little nostalgic sadness as the hon. Gentleman spoke about the vast sums of money. I am one of those who feel that sport has been rather ruined by money. I regret the passing of the days when local teams were local teams. As a boy in the early 1950s, I used to go and watch Grimsby Town. All the players came from the area and it was a true local team, as were most others. I greatly regret that money has intruded so much that in some famous teams almost none of the players is eligible to play for this country.

We then heard from my hon. Friend the Member for Tiverton and Honiton (Mrs. Browning) about the way in which certain too trusting, perhaps even gullible, pensioners had been misled by those selling home income plans. She spoke movingly of the distress that is caused, even going to the extent of naming an individual, making proper use of parliamentary privilege. I hope that her plea will be heeded in all the appropriate quarters. I hope, in particular, that those who have charge of our building societies will have regard to what she said.

The hon. Member for Leeds, North-East (Mr. Hamilton) began with a brief but eloquent and moving tribute to the late Derek Fatchett. I associate myself with what he said—as I am sure does every hon. Member present—about a colleague who will be much missed for many years. I hope that when he goes home to Leeds this weekend he will convey those views to the family of Derek Fatchett.

The hon. Gentleman spoke about the terrible problems caused to young women who are subjected to the appalling physical and mental brutality of pimps. He made

a plea for summary justice so that people can be tried for offences that it is generally known they have committed. That is too complex a subject to deal with in proper detail in a mere moment in responding to this debate, but I hope that the Law Officers heed what he said and that we may see some action.

My hon. Friend the Member for Macclesfield (Mr. Winterton) spoke of a building society as Macclesfield's own. I thought that he was Macclesfield's own—he certainly has been for the past 28 years in this House. Nobody has spoken up more vigorously for their constituents over those years. This morning, he made a plea for the improvement of the A523 and the A6, referring to the problems that would be caused by the opening of a second runway at Manchester airport and the traffic that the Commonwealth games would bring. For good measure, he might also have talked about the world cup coming here in 2006. I hope that Transport Ministers will respond.

My hon. Friend also made a plea for the East Cheshire NHS trust to be maintained, and talked about wanting to protect the Cheshire building society—Macclesfield's own—from the predatory actions of get-rich-quick merchants. I have great sympathy with that point.

The hon. Member for Braintree (Mr. Hurst), who has become a regular at these debates, raised a constituency matter. I cannot begin to have any expertise on the Essex structure plan, but I know from personal experience the threats of urban encroachment in lovely rural areas. I can assure him that there are lovely rural areas in South Staffordshire as I well know there are in Essex. I sincerely hope that his campaign for the green belt will be heeded. I could not help but think of the immortal remarks of the Deputy Prime Minister a few months ago when he said, "The green belt is a Labour achievement and we shall build upon it." I hope that he will, but in the right sense.

The hon. Member for Hazel Grove (Mr. Stunell) expressed his support for building societies and echoed almost to the word what my hon. Friend the Member for Macclesfield said. He spoke with understandable consternation about the multi-modal study for the south-east quadrant of Greater Manchester. What awful gobbledegook we are subjected to these days! May his bringing that appalling mouthful to the attention of the House teach those a lesson who really ought to know about plain English.

The hon. Member for Middlesbrough, South and Cleveland, East (Dr. Kumar), who has the longest-sounding constituency, made the longest speech of the morning, although he did warn us he would. I must be kind to him because when he was briefly here in another incarnation, he was my pair at a time when I desperately needed one, so the gratitude that he then inspired in me will not easily evaporate. He seemed to be speaking from rather over-copious notes when he gave us a sort of essay on the demographic profile of the north-east—perhaps the north-east quadrant of Middlesbrough.

We all have problems with the revenue support grant and the standard spending assessment and it was right that the hon. Gentleman should bring these matters to the House. Just as I was longing for an eclipse, lo and behold my hon. Friend the Member for West Suffolk (Mr. Spring) talked about one. At that point, the hon. Member for Middlesbrough, South and Cleveland, East seemed to shuffle away quite a lot of the speech that he had prepared.

In an entirely non-partisan, non-party political way, my hon. Friend the Member for West Suffolk talked about the eclipse in Cornwall. He explained that bookings were down and that Cornwall could easily cope with ordinary tourism. No wonderful part of England could have had a better and less partisan advocate than my hon. Friend.

The hon. Member for Linlithgow (Mr. Dalyell), who uncharacteristically is not in his place, talked about the Kosovo crisis. He expressed misgivings about sending in ground troops and expressed a need for the House to debate a substantive motion. As the Leader of the House has made plain on a number of occasions, there is no recent precedent for a debate on the conflict on a substantive motion because of the dangers that that can pose to those who are upholding our country's honour and integrity. I shall say no more, as the hon. Gentleman is not here.

My hon. Friend the Member for Southend, West (Mr. Amess) raised no fewer than seven issues. I am most grateful to him for his plug for the banquet that I am organising in Westminster Hall on 1 July. I believe that there are about 10 tickets left and applications will be received later. I hope that it will be yet another wonderful event in the history of that great hall, which encapsulates the history of our nation.

My hon. Friend then talked about a slightly less illustrious building—the Palace theatre. His speech was a bit like "The Archers". We look forward to a new episode on the Palace theatre every time we have one of these Adjournment debates. If it is dark in August, I suggest that, in preparation for the winter pantomime, my hon. Friend hold nightly public meetings there and entertain his constituents in the way that he entertains us here. That would be a lovely curtain raiser for the pantomime about which he told us—in which I am sure the Deputy Prime Minister will be playing Widow Twankey.

My hon. Friend also talked about the need for proper consumer protection, about the indignity to which disabled people are sometimes put by medical examinations, and about his constituent, who is in prison in France. That was a deeply disturbing tale.

The hon. Member for North-East Derbyshire (Mr. Barnes), who regularly contributes to these debates, talked about the problems at the passport office in Liverpool. We all know about them. He also spoke of the difficulties faced by those who are made redundant by firms that then go into liquidation. He then referred to Kosovo and the need for very careful targeting, and expressed some misgivings about recent events.

My hon. Friend the Member for East Worthing and Shoreham (Mr. Loughton) gave a splendid testimonial to Mrs. Hazel Jones, who set up the First Check Point organisation to deal with cowboy builders. It is obviously a marvellous initiative which I hope will be emulated in all parts of the country.

The hon. Member for South Swindon (Ms Drown) spoke with great knowledge about genetically modified food and asked the central question: why do we need it? I hope that, in the weeks ahead, Ministers will provide detailed answers to that question above all and to the other questions that she legitimately raised.

Finally, my hon. Friend the Member for Ruislip-Northwood (Mr. Wilkinson) made some extremely realistic comments about the conflict in the Balkans. He gave the Government strong support. This

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gives me a chance to return to the speech by the hon. Member for Linlithgow, who has now resumed his seat. He and I have differed on the issue for many years, although I respect his integrity. My own views are closer to those of my hon. Friend the Member for Ruislip-Northwood, who, at the end of his speech, said that NATO must win and that we need a realistic assessment, with facts being put daily before the people in a convincing way that instils confidence in our troops. That must be taken very much to heart.

We have had an interesting, wide-ranging debate. I am delighted to have had the chance briefly to refer to every speech and I hope that I have kept my part of the bargain by sitting down now and allowing the Minister to respond.

12.17 pm

The Parliamentary Secretary, Privy Council Office (Mr. Paddy Tipping): It has indeed been a varied, interesting, stimulating and sometimes vigorous debate. Hon. Members on both sides of the House have taken the opportunity to argue for their constituencies, for local interest groups and at times for individuals. In addition, some big themes have been raised. A particular theme that permeated several speeches was the conflicting interests involved in encouraging development, transport and industry and sustaining and enhancing the environment.

The hon. Member for Hazel Grove (Mr. Stunell) talked about the development of wind farms. I am very keen on the idea and I assure him that the Government will reach their 10 per cent. target on renewables by 2010. However, wind farms have a downside, particularly in an attractive landscape. Those who advocate wind farms need to remember that a wind farm that could produce as much electricity as a conventional coal power station, depending on wind speed and other factors, would have to be the size of Greater Manchester.

Some hard issues were raised by the hon. Members for Hazel Grove and for Macclesfield (Mr. Winterton), and by my hon. Friends the Members for Leeds, North-East (Mr. Hamilton) and for Middlesbrough, South and Cleveland, East (Dr. Kumar), who talked about the problems of inner cities. My hon. Friend the Member for South Swindon (Ms Drown) spoke of the balance between developing and protecting the environment in the context of genetically modified food. That was a key theme in the debate.

The second key theme this morning, which is extremely important, is the conflict in Kosovo. My hon. Friend the Member for Linlithgow (Mr. Dalyell) will know that there will be yet another statement by my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Defence. It is important that, as the House adjourns for the recess, hon. Members should be kept up to date with developments. He asked what would happen during the vacation. If significant events take place, he can be sure that there will be calls for Parliament to be recalled, and I can assure him that they will be considered seriously. It has been important to keep the House up to date with developments, and there has been a statement or a debate roughly every fortnight.

The hon. Member for Ruislip-Northwood (Mr. Wilkinson) pointed out that there was a need not just to keep the House involved, but to talk to the wider public about our aims and whether they are being achieved; and about the real difficulties.

My hon. Friend the Member for Linlithgow spoke of the dangers of ground troops, and he will know that that matter is being looked at closely. He will know also that the issue of precedents for debates in the House has been considered on a number of occasions and, as the hon. Member for South Staffordshire (Sir P. Cormack) said, precedence is with us, not my hon. Friend, on this matter.

I very much enjoyed the speech by the hon. Member for Tiverton and Honiton (Mrs. Browning), and I was pleased that the hon. Member for Hazel Grove, my hon. Friend the Member for South Swindon and the hon. Member for Macclesfield (Mr. Winterton) talked strongly in favour of the benefits of mutuals. We must let mutual building societies speak for themselves and demonstrate—as I think they can—in a market economy that their interest rates are lower than those organisations have converted to banks.

We must get the message across to members of the mutuals, because they must have the right to decide on the future. It may well be that the rules are not right at the moment, and I have raised that issue in the past. However, I know that Treasury Ministers are aware of the issue, and I am sure that they will be prepared to meet the hon. Member for Tiverton and Honiton and others to talk about mutuals.

The hon. Member for Tiverton and Honiton referred also to failed income support plans, and she was right to say that there are problems in this area. Financial Services Authority regulators have paid out £69 million in compensation to 4,500 individual claimants, but there is still more to be done. I am confident that my hon. Friend the Economic Secretary will be prepared to meet the kind of delegation that was asked for this morning.

The hon. Member for Macclesfield spoke out strongly about transport issues to the south of Manchester and in the Cheshire area. I ought to admit that I am perhaps one of the culprits who has despoiled and helped to damage his village. I come from north Nottinghamshire, and I regularly use Manchester airport. The route from north Nottinghamshire to Cheshire is an extremely attractive one, which I have admired. I am sure that people do not admire my own car going there.

I am pleased to note that a multi-modal study of the south-east quadrant of Greater Manchester is now taking place. It is important that such studies report early, as the length of time that planning decisions take is an issue. People can often live with bad news, but they cannot live with uncertainty. It is important to pursue the campaign to try to integrate transport and to put money into rural bus services.

The hon. Member for Hazel Grove talked about petrol prices going up, and referred to a lack of communication in the Government. Petrol prices went up as a result of Treasury action, but, as a result of interdepartmental discussions, the rural bus grant—which the hon. Gentleman acknowledged had merits, and some demerits—was introduced at the same time.

I heard what the hon. Member for Macclesfield said about the NHS trust in his area, and it is important that people deliver services in a way that best benefits consumers in the area. My message to those reorganising the health service would be to wait a while and see what happens to primary care groups before moving to trust status.

I understand all too well the points made by my hon. Friend the Member for Braintree (Mr. Hurst) about housing development. I applaud his action in making sure that the voice of local residents and local councils is heard. We must ensure that brown-field sites are developed before green-field sites. We must ensure that the 60 per cent. target is met, and that sequential development takes place, so that derelict sites are developed before the more profit-rich, green-field sites that developers in his area are clearly looking for. We ought to keep an eye out for the urban task force report, which is due shortly.

My hon. Friend the Member for Middlesbrough, South and Cleveland, East (Dr. Kumar) talked about the needs in his area and the desires of his local council. I was in local government, and I used to complain vigorously about the standard spending assessment formula and the way in which it disadvantaged my county. However, every council takes that view. The best way forward is to look at making the best use of resources and making do with what one has, rather than devoting effort to what one does not have.

I am confident that the council in Redcar and Cleveland is modernising, and I understand my hon. Friend's point about the need to review local government finance. This issue is on the desk of the Deputy Prime Minister, and a review is taking place. Again, these are hard issues, but Redcar and Cleveland received the best settlement—a 5.2 per cent. increase in SSA—for many years.

The hon. Member for West Suffolk (Mr. Spring) talked about Cornwall. I was in St. Ives a few days ago, and I appreciate the importance of the tourism industry to Cornwall. It is a high-quality industry which provides value for money, and I am going back on 11 August to see the eclipse. While I was there, people talked to me about raising the quality of the tourism industry, and they are doing that. They see the minimum wage not as a threat, but as an opportunity. The county council, the police and the staff at Truro general hospital are working hard to ensure that everything will be right on 11 August.

I will write, as I always do, to the hon. Member for Southend, West (Mr. Amess), who raised a number of issues. On disability, it is important that we make progress in providing work for people with a disability who can work, while providing security for those who cannot. I understand the difficulties that have arisen at medical boards, and I know that complaints are made. The wait until the tribunal deserves further attention only.

The problems at the UK Passport Agency—mentioned by my hon. Friend the Member for North-East Derbyshire (Mr. Barnes)—also deserve attention. The situation is not good, although a new system has been put in place. There are difficulties, but 99 per cent. of applications are being dealt with within the time frame.

On the jobseeker's allowance, I assure my hon. Friend that Ministers from various Departments are tackling the problems.

I wish I had a Hazel Jones in my constituency. There has been talk of transfer fees in the Chamber today, and we could have a discussion on transferring Hazel Jones to Nottinghamshire so that she could set up a First Check Point group in my constituency.

I was pleased that my hon. Friend the Member for Leeds, North-East had a chance to mention Derek Fatchett.

Also, there is a great deal to be done to tackle crime, prostitution and drugs in Leeds, and we must work hard to ensure that that happens.

My hon. Friend the Member for Bassetlaw (Mr. Ashton) opened the match by talking about problems about employment permits. I am told that decisions will be made by 30 June—

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Mr. Michael J. Martin): Order.

Feltham Young Offenders Institution

12.30 pm

Dr. Vincent Cable (Twickenham): I have been fortunate in winning ballots for Adjournment debates, but this is the first occasion on which I have had the opportunity to introduce a debate on what is, frankly, a substantial public scandal. Feltham young offenders institution is in crisis and has occasioned one of the most critical reports on a public institution to have been written in recent years.

My interest in the matter goes back about 18 months. I received a letter from a constituent who was on the educational side of the establishment, which is not in my constituency but in that of the hon. Member for Feltham and Heston (Mr. Keen) who, I note, is present today. The letter drew my attention to the deficiencies in education provision, and I asked parliamentary questions to which I received full and helpful answers from the Home Office.

The impression of an institution in crisis was reinforced by two subsequent visits and by discussions with visitors and members of staff, and it was confirmed by the chief inspector's report. The report's introductory paragraph is more eloquent than I could ever be. It says:

"This report on an unannounced inspection . . . is, without doubt, the most disturbing that I have ever had to make in my three years as HM Chief Inspector of Prisons. I have to disclose to the public not only that conditions and treatment, of the 922 children and young prisoners . . . are, in many instances, totally unacceptable. They are, in many instances, worse than when I reported on them two years ago and reveal a history of neglect of those committed to their charge and a failure to meet the demands of society to tackle the problem of offending behaviour."

The report goes on to say:

"A picture emerges of an institution and staff overwhelmed. Whatever the cause, it must be tackled root and branch now."

I asked for this debate in the context of the report and the strength of that conclusion. The report says everything that needs to be said on the subject.

The start of the problem is chronic overcrowding, which originated in the early 1990s with a massive build-up of Feltham to serve the whole of London. The number of inmates increased by about 150 per cent. between 1992 and 1996. The premises and number of staff are not adequate to cope with so many prisoners.

When I visited the centre about three weeks ago, I was told that the official staff ratio is 5:1, but that, because of recruitment difficulties and unfilled vacancies, it is frequently far worse. Staff are often sick and there are simply not enough staff on the premises to provide supervision for recreation and association, so, for much of the time, many prisoners are on what is described as a basic regime: they are locked in their cells for 22 hours a day. That applies to unconvicted remand prisoners as well as convicted prisoners; to juveniles of 15 as well as young men convicted of serious offences.

The Minister has been to the prison and will know that often two young men spend 22 hours a day in a small cell, eating, using the toilet and sleeping within a few feet of one another. Doubling up has become routine practice. There is a protocol to manage the situation, but the inspector describes one case of a 16-year-old on remand for a relatively minor offence, sharing a cell with a hardened young criminal with a violent record. Such mixing of criminals and remand prisoners appears to be common and can only perpetuate many of the difficulties that young people have in the institution.

Another problem is the simple physical squalor. The Minister will recognise that there is a contrast: when one goes into premises with attractive gardens and relatively modern buildings one is not prepared for the sheer filth that is recorded in graphic detail in the report. Young men who frequently have no change of underclothes for a week use blankets and mattresses that are filthy, while clean blankets and mattresses stay in the cupboards.

For some reason, no one in the institution seems to know how to repair showers. Two or three weeks ago, I visited the wing on which the chief inspector had reported, and the showers were still not working, so people were still not washing. There is an overriding feeling of physical squalor. With 900-plus adolescents and young men in an institution, there are bound to be hygiene problems, but those are compounded by the way in which the system is managed and by the sheer lack of resources and staff.

More serious than the overcrowding and the dirt is the neglect of the special needs of many of the people coming into the centre. Many are no doubt difficult criminals who need to be locked away to protect society, but many are seriously vulnerable. The report shows that about 25 per cent. of all those entering the prison are users of the highly addictive crack cocaine. Many are in serious difficulties with drugs, but there is no organised detoxification or rehabilitation programme.

Many of the inmates have serious mental health problems. A separate Home Office study showed that roughly a third of prisoners in young offenders institutions need some form of psychiatric attention, but the number of psychiatrists in the prison was cut in the early 1990s and has not been restored.

One of the most damaging sections of the report relates to conditions in the medical unit. There are supposed to be 13 members of staff, but there are nine vacancies and four members of staff are on long-term sickness, so there are simply not enough nurses to look after the patients. I believe that a typical ratio is 30 patients to two members of staff. There is no supervision, so the wards are locked, and the problem is getting worse.

Education—probably the most important requirement of many of the young people—is seriously deficient. I do not want to be wholly negative, and the improvement in the number of hours of education provided is a positive angle that I would like to put on the record, but the report makes it clear that the education is often totally inappropriate. There is virtually no provision for the more academically gifted inmates or for those with moderate learning difficulties.

A comparison between Feltham and a comparable centre such as Aylesbury, which has more money but about half the number of inmates, shows the poverty of Feltham's education provision. That cannot be wholly illustrated by statistics. When I visited Feltham, something happened that many of the inmates recognised as typical. A rehabilitation programme to help people not to reoffend had been long prepared for and there was a great deal of expectation about it, with staff working enthusiastically; but a message came through from the Home Office that there were new priorities and the programme was cancelled at the last minute. One cannot measure the demotivating effect of such decisions.

Many of the inmates indulge in what is rather archly called self-harm. A few years ago, the institution had a reputation for suicides. Fortunately, there have been no suicides for a couple of years, but there is almost one case a day of self-harm of varying degrees of seriousness.

The inspector's report gives the figures on violence. I think that there were 78 assaults on prison officers and about 200 on fellow prisoners in the last year for which figures are available. That is a very high incidence of violence. That is one reason why the prisoners are locked away. There are not enough staff to supervise them and prevent violence. One of the most damning statistics that I discovered in my background work was that almost 90 per cent. of young offenders in the institution reoffend. There is virtually no success in preventing repeat offending. The phrase "the university of crime" is often misused, but it seems an appropriate description to use in this case.

The report asks who is to blame: who is responsible and accountable? It makes some damning comments about management with a big "M"—I am not sure who the operational manager is. The report states:

> "A senior manager shared his view of the establishment with us. He considered that there were examples of good staff and volunteers doing good things with young people in many departments but that the core of the institution was rotten."

Who is responsible for that? The report is understandably reluctant to blame the staff, who it says are overwhelmed and are doing an impossible job. I met many officers who are genuinely idealistic and hard working. However, they cannot cope. Management at the centre is a problem. For example, a Minister should not have to intervene to solve hygiene problems: that is a matter for management on the ground.

If, as the report says, the problem is not with management and staff, is it with the Home Office? Who in the Home Office is managing this institution? Who makes the decisions about funding and priorities? Who ensured that the 1996 recommendations were not implemented? There is a serious problem of accountability, which has implications for Ministers. The present Minister inherited this problem so it is not reasonable to saddle him with the responsibility, but the fact is that conditions at the establishment have deteriorated over the past two years. Somebody made decisions at a ministerial level to freeze the budget of the young offenders institution since 1993–94 in nominal terms—its budget is falling in real terms at a time of crisis. Who is making those decisions?

There is a failure not just on the part of the centre and at Home Office and ministerial level, but in the system as a whole. I was shocked to discover in the report that only 29 of 200 inmates interviewed had been told about bail provisions while in the magistrates court. Many remand prisoners should not be incarcerated: they should be out on bail. However, they do not know about bail provisions. Many of them are young blacks—about half of the prisoners in the institution are from ethnic minorities—who are going straight from the streets to prison and into a life of crime. That is often a result of the workings of the magistrates court system and the total failure of the bail system. The report pointed to a key failure in local authority homes and produced an enormous amount of evidence to that effect. It found that some 40 per cent. of inmates passed through local authority homes, which failed them utterly. There is evidence of a lack of care, and of abuse. It is a catalogue of disasters in Government decision making at all levels.

I do not know whether other hon. Members wish to contribute to the debate, so I shall conclude. What should be done now? First, there is a clear need for new premises to separate the juveniles from the adults and the remand prisoners from the convicted prisoners. I know that the Government have plans for a new centre, which I hope the Minister will describe today.

A second, more serious, problem is staffing and resources for staffing. There are not enough people on the ground—whether they are warders, medical staff or teachers. Where is the wherewithal to rectify that problem? It is easy to ask for more money, but there is a problem of priorities within the Home Office. Why does a centre such as Medway receive roughly 10 times as much funding per capita as the young offenders institution in London? Somebody has their priorities totally wrong. How will that staffing and resources problem be rectified?

Thirdly, there is an issue of joined-up government here: the relationship between the Home Office and both the health service and the education system. For example, we must ensure that money directed to local authorities for education is passported to the prison so that young prisoners get some basic education.

Fourthly, what plans do the Government have to try to keep people out of prison in the first place? We know that pilot programmes are being conducted in Scotland and in the Thames valley to ensure that many young offenders—whether remand cases or not—do not enter the prison system. What is being done to achieve that objective?

Finally—and perhaps most important—the most shocking thing about the report is that its findings were made two years ago. The situation has got worse and nobody appears to be responsible. Will the Minister confirm who is responsible? Is the Home Secretary or a named individual in the Prison Service willing to take personal responsibility for ensuring that the recommendations made in this report—described in most trenchant terms for a document of this kind—are implemented?

12.45 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the Home Department (Mr. George Howarth): I congratulate the hon. Member for Twickenham (Dr. Cable) on securing this Adjournment debate and raising this important matter. The chief inspector of prisons, the board of visitors and others have raised serious concerns about the operation of Feltham young offenders institution, and I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for raising some of those concerns and for giving me the opportunity to respond to them.

I shall answer briefly the points that the hon. Gentleman raised in the concluding part of his speech. The first responsibility for Feltham or any other institution for that matter, lies with the Prison Service and the new Director General of the Prison Service, Martin Narey. Responsibility is then devolved through the area management structure to the governors. My right hon. Friend the Home Secretary made it clear almost as soon as he came to office after the election that Ministers are no longer prepared to make an artificial division between policy and operations, and pretend that it is someone

[Mr. George Howarth]

else's fault. Unlike the previous Government, we accept that, in the final analysis, we are responsible for what goes on in the Prison Service. We take that responsibility very seriously.

The hon. Gentleman was kind enough to mention that I have visited the establishment. It is also significant that my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State visited that institution on 13 February 1998, as did the then Minister of State, my right hon. Friend the Member for Cardiff, South and Penarth (Mr. Michael), on 6 April 1998. There has been a high level of ministerial interest in the establishment.

The chief inspector's report of his short, unannounced inspection of Feltham young offenders institution last December is highly critical—I have no wish to pretend otherwise. It is particularly critical of the fact that few of the recommendations in the chief inspector's report of the full inspection of Feltham, which took place in 1996, have been dealt with. My noble and learned Friend the Minister of State, the Home Secretary and I found aspects of that report shocking, and I well understand the anger and concern expressed by the hon. Member for Twickenham about what has been done and what needs to be done. I am sure that the hon. Gentleman will forgive me if I do not cover in the time available all of the issues that he has raised. I give an undertaking to write to him about any of the areas that I am unable to touch upon.

The Prison Service and the Government are determined to turn the establishment around and to make further substantial progress on the serious concerns that have been raised. The newly appointed governor, Niall Clifford, who took up his post in April, and the new area manager responsible for Feltham have been charged with that task. However, in recognising the problems, we should not overlook the successes at Feltham as reported by the chief inspector. They include the Nightingale pre-release course and the Quail murder charge project, both of which received recognition recently in the form of Butler trust awards.

The chief inspector said that "virtually nothing" had been done to action the recommendations in the 1996 report. I do not believe that that statement is wholly true; nor do I accept that there has been a marked decline in conditions as suggested. However, it is true that progress has been too slow in improving conditions in some areas. Fundamental problems undoubtedly existed at Feltham, and the Prison Service published an action plan addressing all the chief inspector's recommendations—almost all of which were accepted in principle.

Some recommendations, however, would be very resource intensive, and implementing all 181 recommendations immediately would have been prohibitively expensive and, perhaps, physically impossible. Where action on recommendations was not taken, the reasons are almost without exception related to population pressures, to which the hon. Gentleman referred; funding and recruitment difficulties, or industrial relations issues. That said, some areas in Feltham have improved since the chief inspector's 1996 visit, and the additional resources that have been made available through the comprehensive spending review should, if they are used properly, ensure that further progress can now be made.

In response to the most recent inspection report, the Director General of the Prison Service established a task force, led by a senior governor when the report was made available to the Prison Service. The task force has charted a plan for improvement that we intend will be implemented over the next six months. To that end, an additional £320,000 was immediately made available for 1998–99 and a further £500,000 is available for 1999–2000.

Further additional funding has been made available through the comprehensive spending review, and that includes £700,000 for extra education, the drugs strategy and a bail information scheme, all of which the hon. Gentleman mentioned. The drugs strategy and bail information scheme are particularly important. The Government have made available £2 million for a new regime for prisoners under the age of 18. The task force has also commissioned a scoping study to consider long-term problems and their underlying causes.

I shall turn now to the specific and important concerns raised by the chief inspector and echoed by the hon. Gentleman today. Concern was expressed by the chief inspector about the lack of practical support from senior Prison Service management. The director general has recently agreed in principle with the area manager an outline strategic development plan for Feltham which will not only directly address many of the chief inspector's concerns, but chart the establishment's direction for the next three years and provide for the separation of the site into dedicated under-18 and young offender establishments.

More specifically, the plan rightly addresses the treatment of remand prisoners and changes the way in which the Kestrel unit is operated to ensure, as far as possible, that remand prisoners return from court to the same unit and staff, thereby satisfying one of the major criticisms made by the chief inspector. The change in the operation of the Kestrel unit is planned to start on 7 June.

The strategic plan as a whole illustrates clearly the commitment that Prison Service managers are making to the future development of Feltham. The new area manager regularly visits the establishment to monitor progress on the action plan and, importantly, to lend support to the improvements that the new governor is already making.

The hon. Gentleman referred to hygiene. Conditions at Feltham are described by the chief inspector as disgracefully impoverished and filthy. The hon. Gentleman made a similar point in his speech. The general cleanliness of the establishment is being improved. Immediate improvements to cleaning schedules and mattress and blanket provision are in hand. Since December, 600 mattresses have been replaced and more are being made available. New cleaning schedules and arrangements for inspections have also been introduced to ensure that cleaning takes place, and senior managers have a direct role in those inspections. In addition, new laundry facilities are being made available at another prison. Funding was made available almost immediately to undertake a backlog of small repairs. It appears that the shower has been overlooked, but I hope that progress will now be made on that.

The hon. Gentleman referred to the level of regime at Feltham and time spent out of cell, which were covered in the chief inspector's report. As the hon. Gentleman conceded, Feltham, along with the rest of the prison

estate, has experienced pressure from the increase in the prison population, particularly the extra remand prisoners. That has inevitably put a strain on the provision of productive regimes for the young offenders in its care.

That said, the staffing and operation of some units requires improvements in certain areas, and the governor and Prison Service senior managers are working hard to achieve those. As a result, plans are well advanced to reduce the number of remand prisoners at Feltham by using accommodation soon to be available in other establishments closer to prisoners' home areas. That should also significantly reduce the number of prisoners sharing cells.

Efforts to improve time out of cell have also been affected by staffing problems, including an above-average level of sickness and difficulties in recruiting good-quality staff. Remedial action has been taken to improve recruitment at Feltham, and, as a result, 10 new officers started training in April.

Mr. Richard Allan (Sheffield, Hallam): Some of us have been concerned because there seems to have been a slowdown in the provision of local authority secure accommodation for remand prisoners. The Minister just said that he expects more places to be available. Does that mean that more local authority secure accommodation will be coming on-stream?

Mr. Howarth: If the hon. Gentleman will forgive me, I do not want to go into the facts and figures on that issue. I will perhaps respond to his question by letter. That lack of accommodation is clearly a problem, as he as pointed out, and we are trying to tackle it.

I have already mentioned that £2 million has been made available to provide a new regime for prisoners under the age of 18. I shall return to that matter on another occasion, when I will perhaps be able to deal with it in more detail.

Feltham is the only young offender remand centre serving London. The number of prisoners at Feltham has already been reduced by 57 to ease pressure on the establishment and facilitate the opening of a new health care centre. The number of prisoners will be further reduced by at least 90 to allow for the refurbishment of other units and to end overcrowding. There will be an overall reduction in the proportion of remand prisoners as a result of a reduction in court catchment areas.

The Prison Service has for some years been looking for a site to ease the pressure on Feltham and has recently purchased a site next to Belmarsh prison. A planning application to build a young offender establishment serving east London and Essex is being taken forward. Unfortunately, however, it is unlikely that the new establishment will open before late 2002, at the earliest.

The hon. Member for Twickenham expressed concerns about health care. Those have been addressed in the existing Prison Service plan to move the in-patient facility to the newly refurbished health care centre which was implemented at the end of March. A shortage of health care staff and lack of staff continuity is being addressed in a number of ways including recruitment campaigns and secondment of nurses from a local NHS trust. It is not true to say that nothing has been done to improve health care at Feltham. Progress is being made, and we hope that there will be more progress in future.

On 29 March, we announced that, for the first time nationally—this is the joined-up government to which the hon. Gentleman referred—the Prison Service and the NHS will take a joint and systematic look at prisoners' health needs, the quality of the services available and the delivery mechanisms that are needed to meet those needs.

In conclusion, the director general, my noble and learned Friend the Minister of State, the Home Secretary and I all accept that much needs to be done at Feltham. I hope that the measures that I have outlined today—particularly the setting up of the task force, the commitment of additional funding and the improved health care arrangements—will go some way towards reassuring the hon. Gentleman that we are committed to ensuring that the required improvements will be made. We take our responsibility seriously. I thank the hon. Gentleman for raising the matter.

Television (Protection of Children)

1 pm

Mr. John Heppell (Nottingham, East): My hon. Friend the Minister for Tourism, Film and Broadcasting has drawn the short straw, as Ministers from many Departments could have replied to this debate.

I should at the outset thank Nottingham city council, which has been pursuing the matter, and my hon. Friend the Member for Nottingham, North (Mr. Allen), who I understand has written to the Secretaries of State for Health and for Culture, Media and Sport and the Home Secretary on the matter. I almost get the feeling that he is working his way through the Cabinet to ensure that everybody is aware of his concerns. Although this matter pales into insignificance given recent events in Nottingham concerning child protection, it must nevertheless be addressed.

In the spring of 1998, a television company, October Films, began filming children in Nottingham for a documentary that was to be called "Staying Lost". Its motives seemed commendable; indeed, I suspect that it began with all the right motives. It wanted to

"expose the true state of Britain's street children and the agencies that fail them".

I should make it clear that I would wish October Films and others to do that; I would applaud such work. I should also make it clear that I do not seek to defend Nottingham city council or the social services department. I seek to protect children; that is the only motive for my action in this matter. My hon. Friend the Member for Nottingham, North has now joined me. With my hon. Friend the Member for Nottingham, South (Mr. Simpson), all Nottingham Members of Parliament are agreed on the issue.

Although October Films began with the very good motive of championing the cause of these children, unfortunately its work did not have that effect. The best scenario would be that it had a negative effect on the children; the worst that the children were exploited in the production of the film.

We are talking about five very vulnerable delinquent children who, under anyone's definition, would be described as at risk. We are talking about two 15-year-old girls, both of whom were engaged in prostitution. One was accommodated by the local authority and the mother of the other had approached the social services department and asked for help. We are talking about three boys of 14, 13 and 12 years old. One child has a care order, one an interim care order, one is on the child protection register and two are on bail. I am trying to convey to you, Mr. Deputy Speaker, and my hon. Friend the Minister, that we are talking about children who are extremely vulnerable and with whom social workers find it difficult to work at any time. Once the film crew arrived, they found such work impossible.

Several allegations began to come out about what the film crew were doing. There were allegations that some of the scenes were staged, that the children were not homeless in the sense that we would recognise, and that vulnerable children were being encouraged to act anti-socially and irresponsibly. Some allegations were specific: microphones were hidden on the girls before they solicited for prostitution.

Other hon. Members and I got to know about the matter when, back on 18 August, the local newspaper reported that the city council was threatening legal action against a television film crew. The leader of the city council was specific. He was quoted as saying to the film company, "Get Out Of Town", and asked it to leave the care and responsibility of the children to the people who are supposed to look after them.

The following day, several articles appeared in national newspapers under headlines such as

"TV crew 'faked child scenes'",

"Film of street children 'set up'",

"Care home children 'taken out to beg for Channel 4 film'",

and so on. If the city council was to fulfil its statutory duty, it could do nothing but act, which I welcome.

I have not mentioned many of the allegations because they have been denied and the city council has not pursued them—some are much more serious. However, some allegations were not denied. As a result, the city council took October Films to court. I shall quote now from the judgment of Sir Stephen Brown, president of the Family Division, and return to it later, too. I refer the House to page 9 of his judgment, on which it says, following his acceptance of some denials:

"I accept their denial. Nevertheless there is an acceptance of the fact that certain of the children were wired up as alleged. Further on one occasion Mr. Roberts"—

one member of the television company—

"did buy vodka for one of the young girls after filming and it is accepted that the film crew accompanied the children on the train ride to Skegness which was of course so far as the boys were concerned an illicit venture both being on bail and subject to curfew and not intending to pay their fares."

Even if one accepts every denial, the things to which they admitted are cause for great concern.

As a result of the city council going to court, a decent judgment was made. An injunction was never granted because the company agreed that it would do certain things: it would cease to contact four of the five children whom they were hoping to film for the documentary. The fifth child was back with her parents, and her mother had given consent to the filming.

Given that, people may ask why I am concerned about the matter. I will tell the House my worry. In some respects, I do not mind whether things were set up. The issue is whether, just because somebody possesses a video recorder, he or she should be able to film vulnerable children without parental consent. The film company specifically stated that, as far as it was concerned, it needed neither parental nor local authority consent, even though many of the children were in care. It says that all it needed was the consent of the children.

All the children were aged under 16. One may accept the consent of a 15-year-old, but the three boys were aged 14, 13 and 12. What if they had been aged 11, 10 and nine? When does the need for parental consent come into play? That is one of the most important points. There must be freedom of the press, but it should not be at the expense of the welfare of vulnerable children.

Page 21 of the judgment states:

"They approached these children without parental consent or knowledge and indeed without the knowledge of anybody whose duty was to seek to afford a degree of supervisory assistance to the children. Undoubtedly misunderstandings occurred as a result.

Their conduct went far beyond merely observing the children. I am satisfied that in this case the Inherent Jurisdiction of the Court has been properly invoked in respect of the effects of the filming and of the close contact involved in the filming operation on the upbringing of these children. The 'hanging around' the film crew and the excitement which the operation involved undoubtedly affected all these children. I have heard the oral evidence of Mr. Roberts and of Miss Gordon and the oral evidence of the Director of Social Services. The Official Solicitor has commented upon their different perspectives and he has expressed the opinion that he has no doubt about the good faith of all those concerned in this matter."

Good faith is not enough. I accept that the company began with good intentions—to expose matters if they were wrong. I am sure that that can be done without putting children at risk. I hope that we will be able to ensure that such people must have parental consent.

Secondly, the people from the film company stayed with the children for months on end, to gain their trust. They say themselves that the idea was to build a close relationship with the children. People who intend to be with children for months, building a close relationship with them, should be subject to the vetting to which every local authority worker is subject. We should ensure that such checks are conducted in future.

The third issue concerns the Independent Television Commission. As I said, my hon. Friend the Member for Nottingham, North wrote to what seemed like half the Cabinet on this issue. He also wrote to the ITC. I found it worrying that the judge said that he would not comment on the conduct of the film crews, as it was not his job to do so. He said that that was a job for the ITC.

Unfortunately, when my hon. Friend the Member for Nottingham, North wrote to the ITC—he telephoned as well—it wrote back:

"As I explained, the ITC has no powers to obtain tapes or otherwise intervene in programme content before broadcast."

I believe that the ITC rules need to be changed, so that if it sees that someone is breaking its code, it may step in at the beginning.

The issue is not about the content of the final production. I talked to someone this morning who said, "We shall not know whether you are right until we see the final product." The documentary might be brilliant. It might be a "Cathy Come Home" type documentary, which will fire up people to make significant changes. That is not the issue. The issue is whether, in the making of that documentary, children have been harmed. We cannot allow the ends to justify the means. We cannot allow children to be hurt, to be left without protection, in order to create a good documentary. I hope that the ITC will tighten its code of practice to try to ensure that this does not happen again, as I fear that it may.

In some respects, we are lucky that some of the children involved were in care. Would a parent with a delinquent child have been able to take on the film company, to take on Channel 4, and to go to court? I suspect not.

We have had the judgment, but I can envisage a similar situation developing. Nothing has changed. I hope that the Minister and her colleagues, especially in the Home Department, will seek to prevent that by making changes.

I have little time left, but I make a plea about something else. Such subjects can provoke extreme emotion. In the past week in Nottingham, as my hon. Friend the Member for Nottingham, North knows, I have had to consider what is probably one of the most emotionally loaded issues. There is discussion about paedophiles being admitted to a unit in my constituency. I have found that it tends to bring out the worst in people. I simply say that I want the subject of today's debate to be dealt with in a non-emotional way, just as I want that issue to be dealt with in a non-emotional way.

In relation to such issues, our prime—many would say our only—concern should be the protection of children. People can rest assured that, in dealing with such situations in future, the protection of children will be my overriding concern.

I hope that, at some time, my hon. Friend the Minister's colleagues in the Home Office will address their minds to future legislation to ensure that the general public are protected, not only from paedophiles, but from paedophiles who are murderers or torturers—the worst type of people, who are being released on to our streets. I hope that the Government will introduce legislation that ensures not only that those people are secure, but that the public know that they are secure. That aspect of the law needs to be changed, and probably the law needs to be changed as it relates to the filming of children.

I do not want to overburden broadcasting with regulations and I do not want to stifle the freedom of the press, but I do not believe that the press can go unfettered—that they can justify anything that they do by saying that they have a right to give children a voice, as one of the reporters said to us. If children are given a voice, but the process of doing so wrecks their lives—there is some evidence that, indirectly, harm was done to these children—we cannot accept that type of freedom.

1.15 pm

The Minister for Tourism, Film and Broadcasting (Janet Anderson): I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Nottingham, East (Mr. Heppell) for securing the debate. I also thank my hon. Friend the Member for Nottingham, North (Mr. Allen), who wrote to me at length on the issue. So disturbed was I when I received that letter that he may recall that I sought him out as soon as possible to speak to him about it. When we responded to him, we made the point that broadcasting items are matters for the broadcasters and regulatory authorities, and that there is a limited extent to which the Government can intervene. However, I believe that it is important, given the concern expressed about this matter by all Nottingham Members and the fact that it has been raised in the House, that we give the issue a proper airing. My hon. Friend the Member for Nottingham, East said that I had drawn the short straw. It is true that some of the matters that he has raised are ones for my colleagues in another Department, and I shall ensure that those are brought to their attention.

First, I shall set the scene. My hon. Friend the Member for Nottingham, East has spoken in detail about what happened. He has made a point of not becoming too emotional about this issue. It is always easy, especially where children are concerned, to become too emotional. I thank him for the measured way in which he has raised the subject. As he said, it concerns a documentary series called "Staying Lost", which October Films has been making for the past two years. The documentary focuses on children in care who end up living on the streets.

Nottingham City council brought the matter to court, accusing the programme makers of faking scenes, and maintained that parental consent should be given before

[Janet Anderson]

children were allowed to appear in such programmes. Earlier this month, the High Court cleared October Films of faking scenes. As a result of the court case, some of the children were withdrawn. However—it is important to place this on the record—the court expressed concern about the possibility of exploitation of vulnerable children by the media.

I applaud the desire of my hon. Friends the Members for Nottingham, East and for Nottingham, North to protect children. That should be a priority for all hon. Members. The children involved were especially vulnerable. It was alleged that they had been encouraged to act irresponsibly. As my hon. Friend the Member for Nottingham, East said, it was alleged that microphones were planted on the two young girls, aged only 15, who were engaging in prostitution. As he rightly said, that causes considerable concern, and it should be of great concern to the House. He also said that the freedom of the press should not be at the expense of vulnerable children. I wholeheartedly agree with that.

My hon. Friend mentioned the ITC. At the conclusion of my remarks, I shall answer his three main points. As he said, the response that my hon. Friend the Member for Nottingham, North received from the ITC explained that the ITC does not preview programmes. It is up to the licensees to decide, within the framework of the code and their licence, whether a specific item is suitable for broadcast. However, the ITC has a wide range of powers at its disposal to ensure compliance. They range from a formal warning to financial penalties and, in extreme cases, could lead to the shortening or revoking of a company's licence. Last year, the ITC fined Central Television £2 million for a serious breach of the programme code.

There is a paragraph in the programme code which, I am told, applies to children who are actors. It may not have been relevant in this case, but it may be apposite to place that paragraph on the record, because perhaps we should extend to children who are not actors, but who appear in documentaries, a similar concern to that which we extend to children who are actors. Paragraph 6.4 says:

"Performances by children under the upper limit of compulsory school age are controlled by Home Office regulations administered by the Local Education Authorities. All such performances, apart from those appearances expressly exempted under the Children and Young Persons Acts, require a licence from the Local Education Authority in whose area the child lives. Parental consent alone is not enough . . . Particular care should be taken to avoid causing any distress or alarm to children involved in programmes."

So that is already in the code. My hon. Friend is right, however, to say that the ITC may need to re-examine it.

When the matter first received coverage in the national press, Channel 4, the broadcaster that commissioned the film, made a statement that was reported in the following terms:

"'The documentaries will reveal the true state of vulnerable children across the country who have, at some time, fallen out of parental control and slipped through the care net. The public has a right to see this series; Channel 4 believes the films deal with a subject of important public interest.'

"A spokesman said the channel had subjected the allegations made against the programme company to 'careful scrutiny', and was satisfied that it acted with integrity. 'Channel 4 does not believe they have infringed the ITC's code, nor that they have harmed the interests of the children they are filming'".

As my hon. Friend said, when we get a chance to see the documentary, perhaps we can judge that for ourselves.

I shall sum up by responding to the three main points that my hon. Friend made. The point about parental consent, and also the important point about vetting people who are to work with young children, especially vulnerable children, are both matters for my colleagues in the Home Office, and I shall ensure that the concerns expressed will be brought to their attention.

I can also assure my hon. Friend that I shall convey his concerns to the ITC, and that my Department will think about whether there is any need for additional guidance. I shall come back to my hon. Friend on that subject.

1.22 pm

Sitting suspended.

Palestine

1.30 pm

Mr. Nicholas Soames (Mid-Sussex): May I start by warmly welcoming the Minister of State, Foreign and Commonwealth Office, the hon. Member for Ashfield (Mr. Hoon), to his new position. I am sure that he will have a fascinating time as he familiarises himself with the important issues with which he will have to deal, not least Britain's vital interests in the middle east, which are of cardinal importance to this country. All those who are interested in the affairs of the middle east, from whatever position they may come, hope that the Minister will energetically pursue those matters, using the considerable expertise that he will have at his disposal to work with our many friends in the region.

I am grateful for the opportunity of a short debate to focus with renewed urgency on the situation in Israel and the occupied Palestinian territories—the core of the middle east conflict for the past 50 years, and a dangerous time bomb.

Last year, Israel celebrated its 50th birthday, led by a Government who had defiantly set their face against the peace process and who had succeeded only in creating a new diplomatic freeze in the region. Prime Minister Netanyahu based his leadership on the unforgivable and dangerous premise that Israel could achieve lasting peace with its neighbours without making any significant concessions itself. It is to be hoped that the outcome of the Israeli general elections last week, with the resounding defeat of the rejectionist right, is at least in part an acknowledgement that that formula has failed.

I am sure that I will be joined by many in congratulating Ehud Barak on his historic win, and in reminding him of the great expectations that his victory has aroused around the world for real and sustainable progress in the middle east peace process. This is, therefore, an appropriate and sensible time to take stock of how best to capitalise on the changed political leadership in Israel, and how to support all those who are genuinely interested in pushing the peace process forward.

It is clear that, for a long time, the Israelis have been fighting a losing battle in Lebanon. Not only has the local southern Lebanese population been forced to endure years of misery and terror, but the Israeli forces of occupation have experienced a high toll of military casualties. Mr. Barak's announcement on the eve of his election victory that he was committing himself to doing

"everything to take the army out of Lebanon within a year"

is, therefore, welcome news.

However, it is of the utmost importance that withdrawal from Lebanon is but a part of a broader agreement and settlement between Lebanon, Syria and Israel. Before his tragic death in 1995, the late Yitzhak Rabin was involved in negotiations with the Syrian Government, which were reported to be close to reaching agreement on Israeli withdrawal from occupied Syrian territory. The Syrians will accept nothing less than total withdrawal from the Golan heights. That must be moved forward and the earlier talks built on.

The House will recall the recent excellent European Union declaration on the middle east peace process which came from the Berlin summit in March this year and merits particular attention. The declaration states:

"The European Union reaffirms the continuing and unqualified Palestinian right to self-determination including the option of a state, and looks forward to the early fulfilment of this right. It appeals to the parties to strive in good faith for a negotiated solution on the basis of the existing agreements, without prejudice to this right, which is not subject to any veto. The European Union is convinced that the creation of a democratic, viable and peaceful sovereign Palestinian State on the basis of existing agreements and through negotiations would be the best guarantee of Israel's security . . . The European Union declares its readiness to consider the recognition of a Palestinian State in due course".

At this critical time, the European Union has boldly and correctly placed emphasis on Palestinian rights to self-determination as not just inalienable, but as one of the most critical elements of a sustainable peace in the region.

I am sure that hon. Members will join me in giving full support to the statement by the EU, and in assuring hon. Members who support the state of Israel that it must not be seen as an anti-Israel document. Indeed, it is fundamentally the reverse. Over the past three years, the Likud Government in Israel sought to deal with the knotty and painful requirements of the peace process by reducing Palestinian expectations of what they could hope to achieve through negotiation, and then by delivering even less. The statement by the EU is important because it reminds us that the Palestinian right to self-determination is not reducible—rather, a settlement must be achieved that seeks to realise and incorporate those rights.

Mrs. Louise Ellman (Liverpool, Riverside): Will the hon. Gentleman confirm that a negotiated peace, as expressed in the European statement, is absolutely vital, and will he condemn the showering of northern Israel with rockets by Hezbollah, which occurred on the eve of the election of the Labour-led Government in Israel?

Mr. Soames: I agree with the hon. Lady that the only way in which to bring this painful, terrifying and extremely difficult problem to a conclusion is by negotiation. I have no doubt that, over the years, both sides have behaved thoroughly reprehensibly, but the behaviour of the Israeli Government in negotiation is not an elevating example.

The beginning of May this year marked the end of the five-year interim period of the Oslo peace agreement signed by Prime Minister Rabin and President Arafat in Cairo in 1994. Much has happened in that time, but everyone agrees that the Oslo peace process has so far failed to live up to expectations. Interestingly, however, there is now more serious talk than ever before of the inevitability of a Palestinian state.

Many hon. Members have had the opportunity in the past five years to travel to Israel and the occupied Palestinian territories, and to see the changing situation on the ground in the west bank and Jerusalem. Settlement activity, particularly under the Likud Government, has increased at a dreadful and spectacular pace. The west bank, which in the minds of the international community is to be the basic shape of any future Palestinian state, has been totally and grotesquely disfigured by the ever-increasing settler population, and significantly also by the swathes of land that have been taken to create new settlement roads that run from east to west to provide quick and easy access for the settlers into Israel.

[Mr. Soames]

Palestinian land and, therefore, Palestinian life in the west bank have become internally dislocated. The relentless growth of settlements and the confiscation of land for the exclusive use of the settler population have done profound and great damage to the quest for a viable Palestinian national economy, and to the legitimate Palestinian objectives of justice, security, peace and prosperity.

This scenario is not consistent with what we envisage when we speak of Palestinian rights to statehood, or the hopes that we had of the Oslo peace agreement. I remind hon. Members that it was the settlement of Har Homa that, two years ago, brought the peace process to a halt. At the very least, and as an act of good faith, the incoming Labour Government in Israel will, I hope, halt the building on that sensitive and highly symbolic settlement as a matter of priority, and will not allow it to continue to provide a festering focus of conflict between the Palestinian and the Israeli peoples. Incidentally, the settlements represent not only a moral and political crime, but a high aesthetic crime and should, therefore, be trebly condemned.

In article 1 of the 1949 fourth Geneva convention, the high contracting parties undertook to

"respect and ensure respect for the convention in all circumstances."

In response to escalating Israeli violations of several key components of the convention—notably, those protecting the Palestinian population against illegal settlement policies, detention practices, the use of state-sanctioned torture and Israel's unilateral annexation of occupied Jerusalem—a conference of the high contracting parties has been convened. It will take place on 15 July in Geneva. It is to be hoped that Britain, together with its EU partners, will build on the positive spirit of the Berlin declaration by incorporating the Palestinian right of self-determination into the proceedings.

There is absolutely no doubt that Israeli settlement activity provokes bitter and wholly understandable resentment among the Palestinian population of the west bank and the Gaza strip, and it is a source of daily confrontation. I should like to think that, here in Europe, we differ substantially from the United States of America on that issue. Although the Americans—mystifyingly, but under the heel of the Zionist lobby—tend to view settlements as an annoying obstacle, we in Europe are absolutely clear that they are entirely illegal and that there can be no real peace while they continue to be built.

Mrs. Ellman: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Soames: No, I will not.

I remind hon. Members that, unforgivably, 19 new settlements have been started in occupied Palestinian territory since last year's Wye memorandum was drawn up. We must hope, therefore, that we will see an end to the persistent, wilful and illegal defiance by Israel of international humanitarian law. When we talk of a democratic Palestinian state, we should think of a contiguous land mass with free international borders within which Palestinian citizens can move without restriction.

It is, therefore, clear that the current map of the west bank—where Palestinian land has been chopped up into many small areas by the configuration of settlements and settlement roads, and has been dislocated internally and totally disconnected from the centre in Jerusalem—cannot deliver viable statehood. A great wrong has been done to the Palestinian people by those actions.

In an interview last week, Faisal Huseyni, the respected Palestinian official responsible for Jerusalem affairs said:

"Palestine for us is Jerusalem and Jerusalem consists of the old city and not the holy places only. This is our history, our existence and our identity. Those who give up their identity give up their future. The Palestinian people will be dispersed if there is nothing to unite them. Jerusalem, our capital, unites all of us."

There can be no doubt about the strength of feeling about Jerusalem in the minds of the Palestinians and the Israelis. In deference to that strength of feeling and the difficulties ahead, we should reiterate our belief in the status of Jerusalem as it is protected by international law, which will act as the only meaningful bulwark against those parties that are trying to establish total power and control in Jerusalem. I remind the House that the Oslo agreements committed the Israeli and Palestinian authorities to negotiate the issue of Jerusalem as part of the final status negotiations, and we expect and hope that the incoming Israeli Government will make good that commitment.

I must remark again on the tremendous outpourings of joy, in Israel and beyond, at the election last week of Ehud Barak. The Palestinian National Authority and President Arafat expressed optimism that meaningful peace negotiations, including those dealing with final status issues, can resume and will be able to reach a just solution. We in Britain and in Europe have an obligation to support actively and constructively the on-going process of Palestinian-Israeli peacemaking, and to make good use of our extensive influence and expertise in these matters.

I urge the Minister not to allow himself to be blindly dragooned into following solely the United States on this issue, but to build on the excellent independent European Union declaration. Peace in the middle east is in the interests of the Israelis, the Palestinians and all those living in the region.

1.43 pm

The Minister of State, Foreign and Commonwealth Office (Mr. Geoffrey Hoon): I thank the hon. Member for Mid–Sussex (Mr. Soames) for his kind words at the start of the debate. He lobbied me assiduously when I held my previous responsibilities and I am sure that I am grateful that, within a week of my taking on new responsibilities, he is raising with me questions relating to them.

I very much welcome the debate and the opportunity to clarify Government policy on the question of an independent Palestinian state. The debate is timely, because there is a new Prime Minister-elect in Israel. Ehud Barak has made clear his commitment to the peace process that began in Madrid in 1991, and of which the Oslo accords and interim agreement form a vital part. My right hon. Friends the Prime Minister and the Foreign Secretary sent messages immediately after Mr. Barak's election, congratulating him on his stunning success and wishing him well in building a coalition.

A number of issues arise which have to be dealt with. First, what is the current state of play in the peace process? The question of statehood is inextricably bound up with progress on the peace process, and it is

appropriate to start there. The Government look forward to a relaunch of the peace process and we hope that, once a Government have been formed in Israel, both parties will proceed with implementation of the Wye memorandum. In particular, we hope that Israel will proceed with the second further redeployment of troops in the west bank. That will, we hope, open the way to the resumption of final status negotiations, but, in the meantime, we must allow Mr. Barak the necessary space and time to form his Government.

The United Kingdom played a leading role in the negotiation of the Berlin European Council declaration of 25 March on the middle east peace process. In it, we called on both parties to reaffirm their commitments to the basic principles, including "land for peace", established within the framework of Madrid, Oslo and the subsequent agreements, in accordance with United Nations Security Council resolutions. We called for an early resumption of final status negotiations in the coming months on an accelerated basis and for those to be brought to a prompt conclusion, not prolonged indefinitely. We stated our belief that it should be possible to conclude the negotiations within a target period of one year and we expressed our readiness to work to facilitate an early conclusion to the negotiations. That is the position of the European Union and of the Government on the negotiations.

The active involvement of the United States is also crucial to the success of peace negotiations between Israel and the Palestinians. We therefore welcome American readiness, which was confirmed by a White House statement of 26 April, to help to launch final status negotiations once an Israeli Government have been formed, and to review and monitor their progress. The United States has also made it clear that it is prepared, with the consent of the parties, to bring them together within six months to review the status of their efforts and to facilitate reaching an agreement.

All Members will know that the issues remaining to be negotiated—the final status issues—are the most intractable. They are, notably, borders; the status of Jerusalem; arrangements for the refugees from conflicts dating back to 1948; what to do about settlements in the west bank; security arrangements; and, in practice, rights over the fresh water in the region. Under the interim agreement, negotiations on those issues were to have concluded by 4 May of this year. In fact, they have never really started, but there is now a real prospect of progress and that is why it is vital that all parties refrain from any unilateral acts that attempt to prejudge or predetermine the outcome of negotiations on final status issues.

The Government have condemned all such unilateral acts, by either side. For example, they have condemned the continuing building of settlements in the west bank and urged the Israeli Government to cease supporting such activity. That is also why the Government have urged the Palestinians not to make a unilateral declaration of independence. Such a unilateral act would be likely to threaten the prospects for a negotiated peace.

I hope that the hon. Member for Mid-Sussex will accept it from me that the Government's position on Palestinian statehood is as stated in the Berlin declaration. We agreed that the

"European Union reaffirms the continuing and unqualified Palestinian right to self-determination including the option of a state, and looks forward to the early fulfilment of this right. It appeals to the parties to strive in good faith for a negotiated solution on the basis of the existing agreements, without prejudice to this right, which is not subject to any veto. The European Union is convinced that the creation of a democratic, viable and peaceful sovereign Palestinian State on the basis of existing agreements and through negotiations would be the best guarantee of Israel's security and Israel's acceptance as an equal partner in the region. The European Union declares its readiness to consider the recognition of a Palestinian State in due course in accordance with these basic principles".

That statement contains five key elements relevant to our debate. First, we declare our support for the peace process and call for an early resumption of final status negotiations on an accelerated basis. We declare our view that it should be possible to conclude those negotiations within a year, and we urge Israel and the Palestinians to refrain from activities that prejudge the outcome of the final status negotiations and from any activity contrary to international law.

Secondly, we emphasise that the Palestinians have an unqualified right to self-determination, including the option of a state, and that that right of self-determination is not subject to any veto. However, it may not be in their overall interest unilaterally to declare statehood at this stage.

Thirdly, we renew our appeal to the parties to come to a negotiated solution. We do that because we are convinced that agreement is the best route forward for both sides. Only through negotiation and agreement with the Arab countries can Israel guarantee security and acceptance as an equal partner in the Middle East. Only through negotiation and agreement with Israel could a Palestinian state be viable and secure from the start. That reflects the realities on the ground—the point made by my hon. Friend the Member for Liverpool, Riverside (Mrs. Ellman).

Fourthly, we have made it clear that we are ready to consider the recognition of a Palestinian state in due course in accordance with the principles that we have stated. We consider that the Palestinians have the right to self-determination and that, looking at the situation on the ground, we consider statehood to be the best guarantee of peace in the region. However, only a negotiated statehood will guarantee peace: that is what we urge on the parties.

Finally—and it is an important element—we call for an early resumption of negotiation on the Syrian and Lebanese tracks of the peace process. Because we are seeking peace in the region, that will be achieved only when Israel has negotiated peace with all her neighbours. Israel has a negotiated peace with Egypt and with Jordan. We now look for a negotiated peace between Israel and Syria and Lebanon, as well as between Israel and the Palestinians. We very much welcome Ehud Barak's stated wish to have withdrawn troops from south Lebanon and to be in detailed negotiations with the Syrians within a year.

The hon. Member for Mid–Sussex used the phrase "viable statehood". It is necessary to consider the criteria that we would normally apply in deciding questions of recognition.

We do not in general consider a formal process of recognition to be a useful and constructive tool of foreign policy. Clearly, however, if a Palestinian state seeks membership of the United Nations, we shall have to consider whether to admit that state.

In customary international law, four basic criteria are considered when issues of recognition arise. These are whether the entity in question has a defined territory,

[Mr. Geoffrey Hoon]

a permanent population, a Government able to exercise effective control over the state's territory, and independence in its external relations.

It seems clear that, at present, the Palestinian authority satisfies these criteria only in part. There is clearly a permanent population, but control of its territory and independence in its external relations are evidently far from absolute. Statehood itself is not specified as a final status issue, but if the Palestinians were to declare a state now, the situation could be unstable and the newly declared state's qualification for recognition under the four criteria might actually be weakened. A unilateral declaration of independence would certainly destroy the currently good prospects for the peace process. That is why we urge the Palestinians to refrain from any such declaration, and to commit themselves fully to the negotiations.

In the Berlin declaration, we make it clear that any state should be democratic, viable and peaceful. That element of the declaration should not be ignored. On any sensible analysis, the early viability of any state is likely to be vastly increased if it has come into being through negotiation and agreement. Although the Palestinians have made substantial progress towards democracy under difficult circumstances, they still have a long way to go.

To conclude, the Government want there to be a comprehensive, just and lasting peace in the Middle East. We hope that, following the Israeli elections—and once the new government has been formed in Israel—we may have the best opportunity for such negotiations. The current peace process offers by far the best opportunity for such a peace. The Palestinians have the right of self-determination, including the option of a state, but we urge all parties to refrain from unilateral acts that would prejudge the outcome of final status negotiations, and we urge all parties to commit themselves to those negotiations.

Looking at the situation at present, we believe that the best solution for all parties is likely to be a democratic, viable, peaceful and sovereign Palestinian state, arrived at through negotiations.

The key word is "negotiation". The prospects for a negotiated peace are better now than for several years. We have stated our willingness to help in any way we can. We welcome the confirmation by the United States of its readiness to relaunch final status negotiations. We urge all parties to seize this opportunity and to commit themselves wholly to those negotiations.

It being before Two o'clock, the motion for the Adjournment of the House lapsed, without Question put.

Sitting suspended, pursuant to Standing Order No. 10 (Wednesday sittings), till half-past Two o'clock.

CONTINGENCIES FUND 1997–98

Resolved,

That there be laid before the House the accounts of the Contingencies Fund, 1997–98, showing:

(1) The Receipts and Payments in connection with the Fund in the year ended the 31st day of March 1998.

(2) The Distribution of the Capital of the Fund at the commencement and close of the year; with the Report of the Comptroller and Auditor General thereon.—[*Mr. Dowd.*]

Oral Answers to Questions

NORTHERN IRELAND

The Secretary of State was asked—

Good Friday Agreement

1. **Mr. David Crausby** (Bolton, North-East): What progress is being made on issues of equality and human rights under the Good Friday agreement. [84436]

The Minister of State, Northern Ireland Office (Mr. Paul Murphy): The Human Rights Commission was established on 1 March this year. Interviews have also taken place for appointments to the Equality Commission. Since the Belfast agreement, legislation outlawing discrimination has been strengthened and extended to cover the provision of goods, facilities and services.

Mr. Crausby: Does my right hon. Friend agree that human rights and equality issues are a vital part of the Good Friday agreement, and that the provisions for human rights in Northern Ireland are contained in one of the most advanced regimes in the whole of the western world?

Mr. Murphy: Of course I agree with my hon. Friend. The commission will play a key role in ensuring that the development and protection of human rights remain at the heart of the new system of government in Northern Ireland. It represents a major change in the pattern of human rights protection in the United Kingdom. Professor Brice Dickson, the chair of the commission, heads a highly capable and experienced team, which will work closely with the Assembly and the Government to protect the rights of people from all traditions in Northern Ireland.

Mr. Douglas Hogg (Sleaford and North Hykeham): When the Minister talks about human rights, will he please keep in mind the human rights of the paratroopers whose conduct on Bloody Sunday is the subject of inquiry? Does he agree that, if they are to be required to give evidence, it would be right—

Madam Speaker: Order. Judicial proceedings are taking place on that issue. The right hon. and learned Gentleman is a lawyer, and knowing the House as well as he does he should be extremely careful in the questions that he puts to the Minister on these matters.

Mr. Hogg: I was being extremely careful.

Madam Speaker: I hope so.

Mr. Hogg: If the paratroopers are required to give evidence, is it not right, as a matter of Government policy, that they should be granted immunity from prosecution?

Mr. Murphy: I shall be equally careful, Madam Speaker and, as this is a matter for the courts, I shall not answer that question.

Madam Speaker: I entirely agree with the Minister, and I am sorry that the right hon. and learned Gentleman put that question.

Mr. Kevin McNamara (Hull, North): My right hon. Friend will probably recall the statement that the right hon. and learned Member for Sleaford and North Hykeham (Mr. Hogg) made about solicitors in Northern Ireland shortly before the death of Mr. Patrick Finucane.

To come back to the point, will the Minister tell us when he hopes the Equality Commission will come into operation?

Mr. Murphy: I hope that it will come into operation as soon as possible. My hon. Friend knows that the chief commissioner and the other members of the commission are in the process of being appointed. It has been a long and sometimes difficult exercise because, as my hon. Friend knows, the new commission will take over the duties of four other commissions. We now have agreement on the nature and functions of the new commissioners, but it will be some weeks yet before my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State is able to announce their names.

Mr. Jeffrey Donaldson (Lagan Valley): If the new Human Rights Commission in Northern Ireland is to be successful, it must enjoy the widespread support and confidence of the whole community. Is it not a reality that the Unionist community perceives a gross imbalance in the composition of the commission, in that there is no substantial or significant Unionist representation on it? What steps will the Secretary of State take to fulfil her statutory obligation to ensure that the composition of the Human Rights Commission reflects the balance of the community, because it does not do so at present?

Mr. Murphy: My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State is considering a number of options. It is her duty, as far as is practicable, to ensure that the commission reflects the community in Northern Ireland. It is not merely a question of Unionist or nationalist, Protestant or Catholic, but involves gender, age and professional background. It is important to note that, of the 150 applicants for these jobs, only a tiny handful said that they had Unionist sympathies.

Mr. Harry Barnes (North-East Derbyshire): The establishment of the commission is welcome, but the hon. Member for Lagan Valley (Mr. Donaldson) is right about the need for the Unionist community to be represented. Could there not also be a representative of bodies that bravely face violence and intimidation? Those bodies do not seem to be represented either.

Would not human rights in Northern Ireland be greatly benefited by an end to the breaking of limbs, and by the decommissioning of arms?

Mr. Murphy: No one would disagree with my hon. Friend's last two points. As for the commission, it is important to understand that its establishment results from the Good Friday agreement, and is reflected in statute. However, after devolution, provisions will enable other institutions in Northern Ireland to take into account reviews of people such as those referred to by my hon. Friend.

Mr. Malcolm Moss (North-East Cambridgeshire): May I raise the issue of the human rights of the families of the disappeared? Does the Minister agree that, now that the Northern Ireland (Location of Victims' Remains) Bill has

gone to another place, if the IRA does not produce the information that we all seek it will, yet again, have acted in a despicable manner?

Mr. Murphy: Yes. We expect progress within a very short time, possibly within days. We are talking to the Irish Government about this important matter.

Structural Funds

2. **Shona McIsaac** (Cleethorpes): What consultation she is having in Northern Ireland on the future of EU structural funding. [84438]

The Minister of State, Northern Ireland Office (Mr. Paul Murphy): Consultation with social partners and local interests began last August, when we wrote to about 250 local interests to seek their views on the post-1999 structural funds. That was followed by a conference last week. Further consultation will take place over the coming months.

Shona McIsaac: I hope that my right hon. Friend will agree that that demonstrates the support in the European Community for peace in Northern Ireland. Does he also agree that if we were ever to adopt any of the narrow-minded, inward-looking, navel-gazing, anti-European policies of the Conservative party, we would seriously jeopardise the peace process?

Mr. Murphy: I agree that our membership of the European Union has been a major factor in helping to bring about peace and reconciliation in Northern Ireland. May I also say something about the Berlin settlement? It is unique: it has no equivalent elsewhere in the European Union. The special peace programme amounts to about £260 million, and I believe that it gives us an opportunity to bring about a peaceful, positive and stable society in Northern Ireland.

Devolution

3. **Mr. Don Touhig** (Islwyn): What progress is being made towards devolution in Northern Ireland. [84439]

4. **Mr. Bill Michie** (Sheffield, Heeley): What progress has been made in implementing the Good Friday agreement. [84440]

5. **Mr. John Wilkinson** (Ruislip-Northwood): When she expects the Executive for Northern Ireland to assume its governmental responsibilities. [84441]

6. **Miss Anne Begg** (Aberdeen, South): What progress is being made towards devolution in Northern Ireland. [84442]

The Secretary of State for Northern Ireland (Marjorie Mowlam): A great deal of progress has been made in implementing the Good Friday agreement. Practical preparations for devolution are complete, and a deadline of 30 June has been set. The Government and the parties are continuing to talk to resolve the outstanding issues.

Mr. Touhig: The Government have delivered on their pledges for devolution in Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland. As one who represents a Welsh constituency, I consider today's opening of the Welsh Assembly to be an historic event for all the peoples of Britain. Does my right hon. Friend agree, however, that it will be a great disappointment for the people of Northern Ireland if, having elected an Assembly nearly a year ago, they cannot join the people of Wales and Scotland in taking control of their own affairs on devolution day, 1 July?

Marjorie Mowlam: Yes, that would be a great disappointment—not just for the Northern Ireland parties represented here, but, above all, for the people of Northern Ireland. A year ago, in the only poll that counts—a referendum—they demonstrated that they, too, wanted progress. Now they are scared: they are frightened that progress will not be made. I agree wholeheartedly that it would be an appalling tragedy if we failed to make that progress.

Mr. Michie: Will my right hon. Friend reassure the House that the implementation of the Good Friday agreement and the recommendations on policing in Northern Ireland will not suggest that there is an equivalence between the law-abiding citizens who have been fighting for law and order and democracy in Northern Ireland, and those who have deliberately sought to destroy those things?

Marjorie Mowlam: I assure my hon. Friend that there is no equivalence between the two groups as he has outlined them; I can give him that assurance categorically. May I at the same time say to the police and to the other emergency services that they have worked so hard over the years to hold the fabric of Northern Ireland together that I should like—in terms of this question—to put that on record. It is important to do that now when we are working up to the parades, as we have on previous years. The police will be caught in the middle between both communities and will be there trying to hold the fabric of that society together and to uphold the rule of law. It is important that, with the Patten commission inquiry pending, that recognition is clearly given.

Mr. Wilkinson: May I remind the Secretary of State that paragraph 23 of the Belfast agreement is clear:

> "As a condition of appointment, Ministers . . . will affirm the terms of a Pledge of Office".

Paragraph (b) of the pledge is a

> "commitment to non-violence and exclusively peaceful and democratic means".

No amount of vacuous sophistry or appeasement can in any sense permit political parties that are apologists for those who illegally hold weapons to participate in an elected Executive for the Province.

Marjorie Mowlam: I assure the hon. Gentleman that it is not a policy of appeasement. That pledge of office and the commitment to non-violence and a democratic way forward was made by the parties in the talks. We are slowly moving that process forward. Yes, there is violence on the fringes still. Since the beginning of May, the figures are something like 20 paramilitary beatings and 15 assaults. Some of those are by groups that want to destroy the process; others are by individuals. I study the information carefully—I can assure him of that—as I did with the security advisers whom I met at the beginning of the week.

I have hearsay. I have discussion with journalists, but I do not have evidence. I can assure the hon. Gentleman that, if I had evidence, in terms of the judgment that I review constantly in the round as to whether people should still be in the talks, I would act. At the moment, I do not have that information. I make it clear to him that, if I did, I would act accordingly.

Miss Begg: Having seen the pictures of the new Scottish Parliament sitting in Edinburgh and today's official opening of the Welsh Assembly, does my right hon. Friend share the frustrations of the House of Commons that there has been so little progress in setting up the Executive in Northern Ireland? Will she join me in encouraging the politicians there just to get on with it?

Marjorie Mowlam: I thank my hon. Friend for those comments. We all share that frustration. It would be inhuman not to, but we have to understand, and it is difficult some days, that people are trying to change and change is not easy to cope with. I think that everyone wants progress to be made, none more so than the people of Northern Ireland. I do believe that, however slow it is, there is a commitment by the parties to try to make progress and that is what we are seeing at the moment. I am sure that the parties involved in the talks will hear the feelings of the whole House that we want progress to be made because, in the end, that is what the people of Northern Ireland want. I hope that, very soon, with the deadline of 30 June, that frustration declines considerably.

Mr. William Ross (East Londonderry): Given that it appears that, if devolution takes place, Mr. Martin McGuinness will be the Secretary of State for Education, or in charge of education, in Northern Ireland, how will any teacher in any school in Northern Ireland convince the pupils under their care that past involvement in violence, thuggery, beating, mutilations, intimidation, arson, bombings and murder will be a bar to future preferment and advancement?

Marjorie Mowlam: What we are doing is implementing the Good Friday agreement, which was supported by the parties in the talks. Some parties that are not represented here today voted against it. They will be represented in the devolved Parliament, too, if they so choose, but what we are doing is implementing the Good Friday agreement.

As I have said so often in the House, we can live in the past, we definitely have to understand the history, but we should not live in the past. If we do, the violence will continue. With the Good Friday agreement, we have the best chance for many years to make progress. Yes, it is difficult. I do not enjoy talking to people with the kind of background that some of them have, but I prefer to talk than have people killed. That is what the Good Friday agreement, at base, is about.

Mr. Phil Willis (Harrogate and Knaresborough): Liberal Democrat Members appreciate the difficulties facing the Secretary of State in trying to reach a compromise by 30 June. If that compromise is not achieved, and there is not a solution by that date, will she trigger d'Hondt?

Marjorie Mowlam: I should turn that around by saying that, at some point—for devolution to occur—d'Hondt will have to be triggered. We shall be spending the next couple of weeks in trying to find a way of doing that.

Mrs. Maria Fyfe (Glasgow, Maryhill): As we work our way towards reaching agreement, on 30 June, does my right hon. Friend share my frustration at constantly hearing in the House remarks seeming to imply that all the violence is coming from one side? Will she join me in condemning current sectarian attacks against Catholics? What assessment has she made of those who are responsible for that particular violence?

Marjorie Mowlam: I support my hon. Friend's comment that violence—currently, more loyalist than Catholic—is being perpetrated by both extremes. However, that violence should be roundly condemned by all sides. As I said in reply to the question by the hon. Member for Ruislip-Northwood (Mr. Wilkinson), I constantly keep the situation under review and make assessments. My current assessment is that there is not sufficient evidence to make a judgment in the round that action should be taken. However, I should leave the House in no doubt that, if that evidence comes forward, we shall act accordingly.

Mr. Andrew Robathan (Blaby): The Secretary of State said that she wants to live not in the past, but in the present and the future. Will she therefore hail as a success implementation of the Good Friday agreement if terrorists and representatives of terrorist organisations are sitting in the Government of Northern Ireland while those same terrorist organisations—be it the IRA or others—hold on to their weapons?

Marjorie Mowlam: I am sure that the hon. Gentleman will accept that, as Ministers have said many times from the Dispatch Box, there will have to be both decommissioning and formation of the Executive. Both will have to happen: the Good Friday agreement will have to be implemented. Neither is a precondition, but both are obligations. We are currently working on a way in which to ensure that both happen.

Mr. Andrew MacKay (Bracknell): Does the Secretary of State recall that the Prime Minister described the recent Hillsborough declaration as a "huge and significant milestone"? If that is so, why has the declaration's central plank—on IRA decommissioning of illegally held weapons—been jettisoned, and why are we now being told that Sinn Fein members should, before decommissioning, take their places in the Executive?

Marjorie Mowlam: That is a complete misrepresentation of current discussions. The Hillsborough declaration was the best that the two Governments could do to find a way forward in addressing the issues that I outlined in my previous reply. We are trying to address those issues now, as we have been for the past four weeks. The options currently being considered by the parties do not address the big issues of decommissioning and formation of the Executive, which the right hon. Gentleman mentioned, but are a step towards addressing them, in the hope of making some progress in moving the process forward. Progress will not be made in a flash of immediacy, but will be made step

by step. We are now considering only one of those steps, and it does not include the issues that the right hon. Gentleman raised.

Mr. MacKay: The questions that I have asked are essential and fundamental. There is no question that, in a democracy, such as ours, people should hold Executive office but not decommission their illegally held arms and explosives. It would hugely help the talks and the process if the Secretary of State would now promise the House that there are no circumstances in which Sinn Fein members would become Ministers in the Executive without having properly started to decommission their illegally held weapons.

Marjorie Mowlam: Of course, as the right hon. Gentleman has said, the two issues are crucial—central—to the Good Friday agreement. No one is avoiding them. All one is trying to do—it is the nature of negotiations—is to try, slowly, to build the trust and confidence to move the process forward. The issues will be got to—they cannot be avoided; they are part of the agreement. The process that we are trying to achieve is one in which the parties reach a point at which they are able directly to address those issues. If we bang them on the table on day one, we are not likely to make progress. We are still at day one in trying to deal with the issue. That is the nature of the negotiations. We are trying to move issues forward step by step. It is for the parties, with our help and support, to do what they can to reach an accommodation on the issues.

Early Years Education

7. **Charlotte Atkins** (Staffordshire, Moorlands): What progress has been made in the last year in the provision of early years education in Northern Ireland. [84444]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Northern Ireland (Mr. John McFall): Over the past year, significant progress has been made towards increasing the availability of pre-school education in Northern Ireland. In the 1998–99 school year, 2,200 additional places have been provided at a cost of £2.65 million. Resources have been made available in 1999–2000 to secure a further 2,300 free pre-school places, raising provision to almost 70 per cent. of the pre-school cohort.

Charlotte Atkins: Does my hon. Friend agree that the crucial aspects of effective pre-school education must be quality of provision and access for the most disadvantaged? What are the Government doing to ensure that those features are key in Northern Ireland?

Mr. McFall: I thank my hon. Friend for her question. Access for the disadvantaged was worked into our pre-school education policy in the 1997 consultation document. She is right about quality and I should like to reassure her on four points. First, there will be a common curriculum in all settings. Secondly, nurseries will be inspected by education and training staff. Thirdly, the staff will be required to have training or qualifications in education or child care. Fourthly, from 1999-2000 there must be a qualified early years specialist involved in a way that will raise standards for children in those schools.

Mr. Roy Beggs (East Antrim): We in Northern Ireland congratulate the Government on the additional resources that are being made available and the additional places that have been created for nursery school children. To what extent have the concerns of parents about the application of the criteria for entrance to nursery schools been met? Will the Minister undertake to ensure that new funding for future provision goes to the areas where there is currently clearly under-provision?

Mr. McFall: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his question. There have been some misconceptions about the issues. To deal with that, I established an advisory group comprising officials from my Department and the education and library boards. I have told them to keep in constant contact with Assembly representatives and Members of Parliament. We have targeted social disadvantage. From September, two out of every three places will be available to children of parents who are not disadvantaged, but there will be an allocation for the disadvantaged. I know that the hon. Gentleman will welcome those measures on social disadvantage for some parts of his constituency.

Drumcree

8. **Mr. Malcolm Savidge** (Aberdeen, North): What assessment she has made of the prospects for achieving a local accommodation over the disputed parade at Drumcree this year. [84446]

The Minister of State, Northern Ireland Office (Mr. Adam Ingram): Frank Blair, the director of the Advisory, Conciliation and Arbitration Service in Scotland, is continuing to work as a facilitator with the Government's full backing. I also support the efforts of others, including the right hon. Member for Upper Bann (Mr. Trimble), to promote dialogue and resolve the issue. Agreement is clearly possible if good will exists. Local accommodation is in the interests of the whole community.

Mr. Savidge: I pay tribute to the Northern Ireland ministerial team, my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister and all those who are making serious efforts to resolve the difficult problem. What is my hon. Friend's assessment of the possible impact on the Northern Ireland economy, including the tourist trade, of a failure to find agreement at Drumcree?

Mr. Ingram: I thank my hon. Friend for his comments. Another confrontation at Drumcree this year would damage the economy and would clearly hit the tourist trade yet again. Investors and visitors are deterred from coming to Northern Ireland by scenes of violence on the streets. I hope that both sides will fully engage with our initiatives and will seek to reach an accommodation for this year and future years.

Mr. William Thompson (West Tyrone): Does the Minister acknowledge that the situation at Drumcree has been greatly exacerbated by the decision of the Parades Commission last year not to let the parade go ahead? Does he also acknowledge that there are some problems for which there is no accommodation and there is likely to be no accommodation at Drumcree? Will the Government

therefore protect the rights of Orangemen who return to their Orange hall on the public highway and ensure that they have equal rights in the United Kingdom?

Mr. Ingram: I know that the hon. Gentleman was implacably opposed to the establishment of the Parades Commission and we had many healthy exchanges during the passing of that legislation. However, he also has a duty to encourage those who may be in conflict with the body that was established by Parliament to uphold the rule of law at all times. Of course, there are two sides to the issue and that is why the Government, from my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister down, and the right hon. Member for Upper Bann (Mr. Trimble) seek to do everything possible to achieve accommodation and find an answer to this difficult issue.

Restorative Justice

9. **Angela Smith** (Basildon): What the objectives are of the new Government initiatives on restorative justice in Northern Ireland. [84447]

The Minister of State, Northern Ireland Office (Mr. Adam Ingram): The Government support restorative justice because, when operated in co-operation with the formal justice system, it offers a positive, inclusive approach to dealing with the effects of crime by concentrating on restoring relationships between the victim, the offender and the community which are damaged by criminal or anti-social behaviour.

Angela Smith: I welcome that answer. I am sure that my right hon. Friend is aware that it is crucial, particularly in Northern Ireland, that restorative justice has the support of the community. Therefore, when he is considering local schemes, will he stress the importance of flexibility and local imagination to ensure that they work?

Mr. Ingram: I can give my hon. Friend an absolute assurance on that. Those who have been putting the schemes together looked at similar schemes, such as those in New Zealand, and concepts such as family group conferencing and other new and imaginative ideas to try to find new ways forward. Of course such schemes must always work alongside the judicial process. We must ensure that individual human rights are always fully protected within the process of natural justice. The Government are being imaginative and we will listen to new and innovative ideas from the community.

Rev. Martin Smyth (Belfast, South): I accept the Minister's assurance and welcome the steps towards qualified restorative justice. Does he agree that when magistrates courts release people who are charged with heroin dealing, that is not restorative justice, but allows people out immediately to reoffend? Should there not be some cut-off point at which we realise that restorative justice cannot work?

Mr. Ingram: There will be occasions when restorative justice does not work. It depends on everyone co-operating with the process. The drug problem in Northern Ireland is not yet as prevalent as elsewhere in the United Kingdom or in Dublin in the Republic of Ireland. However, the threat is there, and, for that reason, I am actively pursuing a major anti-drugs strategy that is consistent with the Government's approach.

Decommissioning

11. **Dr. Norman A. Godman** (Greenock and Inverclyde): If she will make a statement on progress on *(a)* the decommissioning of illegally held weapons and *(b)* the creation of a Northern Ireland Executive. [84449]

The Secretary of State for Northern Ireland (Marjorie Mowlam): Progress is being made. It is slow and difficult. Sometimes it is four steps forward and three back, but people are still talking and not walking and that is what counts. Everyone is trying towards implementing the agreement in full.

Dr. Godman: Will my right hon. Friend confirm that the Good Friday agreement requires the decommissioning of paramilitary weapons by May 2000 and that if the agreement is to work, progress must be made on all its aspects? Does she further agree that the people of Northern Ireland must be casting an envious eye on Cardiff and Edinburgh, where the Assembly and the Parliament are gathering momentum?

Marjorie Mowlam: Yes and yes.

PRIME MINISTER

The Prime Minister was asked—

Engagements

Q1. [84466] **Mr. Nick Hawkins** (Surrey Heath): If he will list his official engagements for Wednesday, 26 May.

The Prime Minister (Mr. Tony Blair): This morning, I had meetings with ministerial colleagues and others. In addition to my duties in the House, I shall have further such meetings later today. I will also be attending the celebrations to mark the opening of the Welsh Assembly.

Mr. Hawkins: Does the Prime Minister share the commitment of his socialist Members of the European Parliament to giving the European Union power over our savings taxes and capital taxes?

The Prime Minister: We set out our position yesterday on the savings tax. We believe in a sensible and constructive attitude in Europe that manages to secure victories for Britain in Europe, unlike the isolated and the divided regime of the Tories which brought us nothing but defeat in Europe.

Q2. [84467] **Miss Anne Begg** (Aberdeen, South): Last week, this House voted for extra benefits to be paid to severely disabled young people, and it also saw the completion of the Standing Committee on the Disabled Rights Commission Bill, taking this country a step closer—or a roll closer, in my case—towards ensuring that there is an end to discrimination against disabled people. Will my right hon. Friend give an assurance that

all Government buildings and Departments will become models of good practice in dealing with disabled people, and that not only will the necessary ramps, lifts and toilets be in place, but that they will work when a disabled person wants to use them?

The Prime Minister: Of course I agree with my hon. Friend entirely. It is important that the Government and the public sector give a proper lead in installing facilities and making them work. I am sorry if there have been such problems recently. We are proud to create the Disability Rights Commission, which is a big step forward. Over the lifetime of this Parliament, we will be providing more money for disabled people to help them with their problems and to help them to get back to work. We are making the necessary reforms to make sure that money goes to those who need help the most. Our reforms are right in principle and will make sure that, for the first time, many disabled people up and down the country will get the help that they need.

Mr. William Hague (Richmond, Yorks): Instead of negotiating an European Union directive on savings taxation, which includes the withholding tax and threatens thousands of jobs in this country, should not we be making clear that all such directives are unacceptable to this country? Should not the whole idea have been vetoed at the beginning?

The Prime Minister: The stories in some of the newspapers this morning that we have agreed to the withholding tax are, as we told them, complete and total nonsense. There is no change in our position. There will be no withholding tax imposed on Britain by Brussels. There will be no agreement to anything that damages the eurobond market. There will be no agreement; there has been no agreement; there is no agreement. However, we will win the argument—that is the difference.

Mr. Hague: If that is the case, why did the German Finance Minister say after yesterday's meeting that the withholding tax had taken a big step forward? How did he get that impression? How did it come about that the account of the meeting issued to Agence Europe says:

"In the absence of the British point of view on the issue of"—

tax on savings—

"the debate was short"?

How did it come about that the British Chancellor was present at a meeting at which the British point of view was absent? The account stated that the Chancellor of the Exchequer

"undertook to clarify his country's position in June."

How convenient—to do so after the European elections. Is not it always the case that the Prime Minister and the Chancellor pretend to be robust and reassuring in the House of Commons, and are then pathetically weak in the Council of Ministers on these issues?

The Prime Minister: We have been asked to make proposals to deal in a better way with the tax evasion that, perfectly rightly, worries many countries in Europe. I have made it clear here—and I will do so again—that we will use the veto if necessary, but that it is better to win the argument, because there are many other issues on which we will require support from other countries.

On tax harmonisation and the veto, only 18 pieces of tax harmonisation have been agreed by any British Government, and all of them were agreed by the previous Conservative Government.

Mr. Hague: Every time I talk about the future, the Prime Minister talks about the past. Is it not time that the Government showed the way on taxes in Europe? Instead of all the rubbish in the European socialist manifesto that he has signed about harmful tax competition, should not we be celebrating tax competition, extending our tax advantages and widening the gap in taxes rather than trying to eliminate it?

The Prime Minister: It is precisely for that reason that we have got the lowest corporation tax ever, under a Labour Government. It is not only the 18 tax harmonisation measures that the Conservatives agreed: they agreed 42 extensions of qualified majority voting.

Because of our attitude, which seeks to be positive and engaged and to win in Europe, we have secured the rebate that the Conservatives said we would never secure; got better deals on structural funds than ever before, which they said that we could not do; secured the highlands and islands deal, which they said we would never get; and got the BSE ban lifted, which they had imposed. The choice is very, very simple. We can have isolation, division and failure with the Tories or constructive engagement, partnership and success under Labour.

Mr. Hague: What a stream of fiction. If there is nothing to worry about on tax, why are the 200 items of national tax measures now being harmonised by the EU treated as a Government secret, only discovered at all by internet users who speak Dutch? They do not normally look for the details of tax harmonisation proposals. After all the evasions, secrecies and half-truths over the measures, will the Prime Minister agree to publish the list of them?

The Prime Minister: May I deal with the supposed 200 hidden taxes? The Tories got that story on the front page of *The Mail on Sunday*, which would print any old rubbish that they send it. The secret proposal is in fact the Code of Conduct Committee, which is chaired by a Treasury Minister. So secret is it that we had a full debate on it in the House in December.

Mr. Hague: As usual, we get assertions from the Prime Minister that are total rubbish. There has been no debate about the 200 measures now before that committee. This is a Government who are supposed to believe in freedom of information. The Home Secretary said:

"everyone will have the right . . . to information held by bodies across the public sector."—[*Official Report*, 24 May 1999; Vol. 332, c. 21.]

Will the Prime Minister now publish the full list of the 200 measures under discussion?

The Prime Minister: There are no 200 hidden measures, just as we have not given up the veto, agreed to a withholding tax or agreed, for example, to paper-boys, double-decker buses or curved bananas being banned, or any of the rest of the Euro-twaddle that the right hon. Gentleman comes out with. At some point, he and the other people who parrot the same nonsense in the

newspapers, should realise that Britain is in the European Union and it is right that we should be, so for heaven's sake let us make the best of it.

Mr. Hague: So the answer is no, the right hon. Gentleman will not publish the list. The trouble for the Government is that nobody can believe anything that they say on Europe. It is freedom of information on Monday and the concealment of information on Wednesday. It is tax competition here and tax harmonisation over there. The Prime Minister loves the pound at election time and wants to abolish it the rest of the time. Do not the people want the Government of this country to say what they mean, to do what they say and to keep us in Europe, not run by Europe?

The Prime Minister: On the Freedom of Information Bill, the previous Government had 18 years to introduce such a measure. We have now done it.

I have already dealt with the right hon. Gentleman's nonsense about tax. I return to this basic point: the withholding tax is a classic example of the right and the wrong ways to do business for Britain in Europe. There is a problem with tax evasion in European countries. We will not agree to anything that harms the City or the eurobond market or agree to Brussels imposing a withholding tax on Britain. However, as the Chancellor has secured, if we can show other countries a better way of dealing with their legitimate problems while protecting our interests, that is a better way to do business in Europe.

We had 18 years of Conservative Government and their diplomacy in Europe. What did it do? It led us to marginalisation, a lack of influence and the worst situation for Britain in Europe since the second world war. Slowly but surely, a different Government with a better attitude are rebuilding British power and influence. That is the best way to proceed: success under us; failure under the Conservatives.

Mr. Jeremy Corbyn (Islington, North): May I ask the Prime Minister to turn his mind to the situation in Yugoslavia? Does he accept that, after two months of bombing, seeing hundreds of thousands of refugees fleeing Kosovo, hundreds if not thousands of civilian casualties in Yugoslavia and an environmental disaster caused by the use of depleted uranium and the bombing of chemical works, it is time to achieve a peace settlement by involving, rather than bypassing, the United Nations? Is it not time to involve Kofi Annan in a peacekeeping mission rather than watching NATO trying to undermine the situation and continue an illegal war? The United Nations should have been involved from the beginning.

The Prime Minister: First, on a point of fact, in the last day, the United Nations body responsible for the environment has said that the Serbian claims are nonsense and untrue—there has not been the environmental damage claimed. My hon. Friend referred to civilians who have died in Serbia, but I hoped that he would mention also the thousands of people who have been butchered in Kosovo.

We would dearly love it if the United Nations were able to come in, resolve the issue and allow the refugees to return. There have been 72 United Nations resolutions in the past few years asking Milosevic to do the right thing, but he is not a man who cares for the United Nations. He is not acting according to international law: he is pursuing a policy of racial genocide. Anybody who believes in the basic principles of justice and humanity should support our case.

Mr. Paddy Ashdown (Yeovil): Is not the significance of NATO's decision yesterday almost to double the ground forces around Kosovo simply that NATO has at last given itself the means of widening the option for the use of ground forces—if time requires or the military situation allows—from peacekeeping to peacemaking?

The Prime Minister: There is no doubt at all that it is a significant and a right move, taken on the basis of NATO's comments yesterday. I think that it is important that we have demonstrated our clear intent and determination to make sure that there is a sufficient force so that the refugees can be allowed home properly.

Mr. Ashdown: I am grateful to the right hon. Gentleman for that very important answer. Is it not also the case that NATO's much-loved phrase "keeping all options open" has, with an insufficient ground force until now, meant only one of two things: bombing or compromise? This important decision means that we have invested what was until now merely a declaration with the means of making it an imminent reality.

The Prime Minister: As I said, NATO's announcement was made in the terms that it expressed. There is a growing recognition that the air campaign is doing immense damage to Milosevic. In the past two days, scores of tanks and artillery in Kosovo have been hit. However, it is important to ensure that we have sufficient ground forces—we will need them on any basis—to do the job of getting the refugees back home.

Mr. Alan Johnson (Hull, West and Hessle): The Prime Minister will be aware that there is wide cross-party support in the House for the ex-distant water trawlermen, who petitioned him this morning at 10 Downing street. Those men lost their jobs as a direct result of a Government decision; they were promised compensation in the House and have received nothing; £100 million was given to trawler owners, not one penny of which went to the crews. Does my right hon. Friend agree that the passage of time in no way diminishes the legitimacy of their claim, and will he assure me that his Government will give it urgent and proper consideration?

The Prime Minister: I certainly can assure my hon. Friend that we shall give urgent and proper consideration to any claim, but obviously I do so without prejudice to the outcome. We are aware of the strength of feeling and we are aware that the passage of time has not diminished it.

Q3. [84468] **Mr. Desmond Swayne** (New Forest, West): Why has the Prime Minister allowed the disgraced European Commissioners to remain in office for the past two months, drawing their salaries and making 120 important decisions? Is it not the case that their resignation was a complete and utter sham?

The Prime Minister: No, it is not the case, and there will soon be a new Commission. I make an appeal to the

Conservative party which will fall largely on deaf ears: it would be sensible, now that we have a new Commission President, and new Commissioners will soon be in position, if we tried just for once to work with them sensibly and constructively, rather than attacking them all the time.

Q4. [84469] **Mr. Mike Gapes** (Ilford, South): Further to my right hon. Friend's exchanges with the leader of one of the two Conservative parties fighting the European elections, does he agree that the choice in Europe is between a Government who fight for Britain's interests, build coalitions with allies to get their way and have decisions made in their favour, and a party that stands on the sidelines shouting abuse and then experiences resounding electoral defeat, as it did two years ago?

The Prime Minister: That choice is very clear. I know that, in the European elections, people will not want to let the Conservatives in by the back door; no one wants that. The Conservative party's division on Europe obviously remains and is even being exhibited in these elections. A divided party cannot get the best deal for this country. We learned that when the Conservatives were in government, and we learn it now that they are in opposition.

Mrs. Marion Roe (Broxbourne): Will the Prime Minister explain to my constituents why, after two years of a Labour Government and in spite of much rhetoric from Ministers, they are worse off? They are worse off financially because of additional hidden taxes, an enormous hike in petrol prices and higher council tax bills, such as Labour and Liberal-controlled Hertfordshire county council's 9.5 per cent. increase this year. Their commuter journeys to London are disrupted by deteriorating train services—*[Interruption.]* It is true. Their NHS hospital waiting times have soared since May 1997, and Princess Alexandra hospital is closing 25 beds. In my constituency, more children than ever before are not being offered their first choice of school when they transfer from primary to secondary school.

Is it not the case that the Labour party misled the electorate at the general election and is incapable of fulfilling its promises?

The Prime Minister: First, living standards in this country are rising. I am surprised that the hon. Lady did not mention that, under this Government, interest and mortgage rates are the lowest for more than 30 years. We are the Government who put the extra investment into schools and hospitals which her Front Benchers described as irresponsible. We are the Government who are introducing the working families tax credit, which will greatly help low-income families. We introduced the statutory minimum wage. We are reducing class sizes. We are getting waiting lists down. Those are all promises fulfilled.

Q5. [84470] **Mr. Mark Todd** (South Derbyshire): Will the Prime Minister ensure that the network of small town and rural post offices does not fall victim to the correct abandonment of the Horizon project earlier this week? That was an ill-conceived and public relations-led Tory information technology project which failed. Will my right hon. Friend assure me that my post offices will stay open?

The Prime Minister: I can assure my hon. Friend that we remain committed to a nationwide network of post offices. The reforms that we announced at the end of last year aim to help the Post Office to continue to provide such a network. Those reforms will ensure the strict protection of the public service commitment, including universal public service obligations.

We announced earlier this week that the network of almost 19,000 post offices will be equipped with a modern, on-line IT system by 2001. That will enable rural post offices to modernise their existing services and secure their viable long-term future.

Mr. John Hayes (South Holland and The Deepings): This is a straightforward, specific question; I hope that it will be answered in a similar vein. Why, for secondary, nursery and upper-age primary school pupils, are class sizes getting larger under Labour?

The Prime Minister: They are not getting larger. For the first time—*[Interruption.]* The hon. Gentleman does not like the answer. For primary school pupils, class sizes are falling; we have got 130,000 five, six and seven-year-olds out of class sizes of more than 30, where they used to be under the Government whom he supported; and in secondary schools, we are getting the adult-pupil and teacher-pupil ratios down. The extra investment that we are making is already paying dividends.

Q6. [84471] **Mr. Martin Linton** (Battersea): Will the Prime Minister confirm that the Government remain committed to reform of the welfare state—which was created by a Labour Government and will be reformed by a Labour Government—and the chaotic welfare system that they inherited from the previous Government? Will he confirm that they will tackle both those reforms to end abuse of the system while remaining sensitive to the needs of people who, through no fault of their own, are entirely dependent on benefits, which are still very low?

The Prime Minister: In the first two years of this Government, social security spending has been controlled for the first time in ages. Through the new deal, we have been able to offer young people and the long-term unemployed a chance to go back to work and get skills and training. For the first time, we have offered single parents the chance of proper child care so that they can go to work if they wish. We are reforming the welfare state, but in a way that is humane and just, and gets help to people who really need it.

What a contrast with the Conservative Government, who, for 18 years, talked about welfare reform, but under whom the costs doubled, the number of those on benefit rose and rose and no young person in the inner city got the chance of employment, which we are now providing. The Labour party is the party of radical welfare reform, which is conducted in the right and proper way.

Mr. James Gray (North Wiltshire): May I ask the Prime Minister a simple numerical question, which is incapable of being subject to spin or general guff? What was the average secondary school class size when he came to power, and what is it today?

The Prime Minister: As I have just pointed out—*[Interruption.]* The ratio of teachers to pupils in secondary schools is falling; it is not rising. Not merely is the ratio

falling in secondary schools, but primary school class sizes have come down, not gone up. I know that Opposition Members do not like the answer, but that is the answer.

Q7. [84472] **Mr. Jim Fitzpatrick** (Poplar and Canning Town): Tomorrow, the Deputy Prime Minister will be visiting my constituency in east London—and he will be exceptionally welcome—to officiate at the groundbreaking ceremony marking the start of the building of Excel, which, when completed, will be the largest exhibition and conference centre in the United Kingdom. Despite such exciting initiatives, 13 of the 20 most deprived wards in the UK are in Greater London, where we have more unemployment than Scotland and Northern Ireland combined. Will my right hon. Friend confirm that the Government will continue to support the regeneration of the Thames gateway? Does he agree that the areas of London for which objective 2 status is sought have an exceptionally strong case?

The Prime Minister: I certainly understand my hon. Friend's point. I know that, along with his colleagues, he will be meeting Ministers to argue their points on objective 2 status. I gather that Excel, once completed, is expected to create about 14,000 jobs. It is the latest of a series of public-private projects for regeneration of the docklands and elsewhere, and is exactly the right type of co-operation between the private and public sector for the future.

Q8. [84473] **Mr. Nicholas Winterton** (Macclesfield): Will the Prime Minister tell the House this afternoon whether the devious drift to regional government in the United Kingdom, the likely tax harmonisation with the European Union, with all the additional costs for most businesses and individuals in this country, and the sale of our gold reserves—or much of our gold reserves—for a devalued euro are his way of submerging the United Kingdom into a Europe of the regions, thus making the holding of a referendum totally irrelevant?

The Prime Minister: No is the answer to all those points. If I may deal with one—

Mr. Winterton: Deal with all of them.

The Prime Minister: If I may begin by dealing with one of them, on the gold reserves, throughout the world countries have been selling gold in order to diversify their reserves. It has happened—*[Interruption.]* I was not aware that Argentina or Switzerland were about to join the euro. Lots of different countries have been doing it. It was always rubbish that this was anything to do with the euro; it is nothing to do with it.

As for regional government, we have said that we shall work with the regions. If they want greater power, we are prepared to give it.

As for the development agencies that are being set up in the regions, I cannot speak for the hon. Gentleman's region, but I shall speak for mine, the north-east, where everyone welcomes the idea. It is a good idea to co-ordinate investment to get new investment into the region. I appreciate that the Conservatives are opposed to everything to do with greater power to and decentralisation of the regions, just as they are opposed to Europe, but they should not wish all their problems on the rest of us.

Q9. [84474] **Mrs. Sylvia Heal** (Halesowen and Rowley Regis): Experience as a magistrate and from the work that I have done in my constituency has made me well aware of the extent of the problem of drug abuse. Sadly, many children in secondary schools today are experimenting with drugs such as heroin. For some people, financing their habit is not a problem. For others, it is, and they resort to criminal activity, ranging from petty theft to more serious offences, such as burglary, fraud and deception.

I am aware of many of the voluntary projects, such as The Zone drop-in project in Halesowen, which are offering advice to young people and their families, and authorities such as Sandwell health authority, which are setting targets to reduce the amount of drug abuse. Therefore, I welcome the Government's proposals on drug abuse.

Can my right hon. Friend assure me, however, that, in addition to those targets, he will ensure that there is an increase in the availability of treatment and rehabilitation centres? Punishment alone is not a sufficient deterrent.

The Prime Minister: Yes. We are increasing the resources that are going to treatment and rehabilitation. We have introduced penalties as well, such as the drug treatment and testing order, to put criminals with drug problems into treatment. For the first time, assets seized from drug traffickers convicted in this country will be channelled back into action against drugs.

The Government have launched a major programme and attached to it are specific targets to cut drug abuse. For the first time, we are co-ordinating actively across Government Departments the fight against drugs and drug abuse.

Mr. John Butterfill (Bournemouth, West): The Prime Minister knows that I am not one of those who oppose our membership of the European Union, and no one who has listened to him today can have any doubt of his commitment to the well-being of the European Union, but in relation to withholding tax, surely he knows that it would not be uniquely damaging to the United Kingdom, but would be extremely damaging to the European Union as a whole. Therefore, does he not have a duty to do everything in his power to prevent it from occurring?

The Prime Minister: The hon. Gentleman said that he was not opposed to the European Union, and I agree with him in everything else that he said. That is precisely why the sensible response is for us to say to the rest of Europe, "Yes, you have a problem with tax evasion in certain countries"—and it does. Germany has a serious problem with companies simply crossing borders as a means of tax evasion. We are saying, "Look, we can deal with that problem in a different way." The hon. Gentleman is right that the withholding tax, if it were imposed throughout Europe by the centre, would damage not just the UK, but other countries. It is for that reason that we are engaging constructively, and doing our very best to ensure that the damage is not done, but that, instead, we offer those countries a better, more sensible way of dealing with their problems.

Q10. [84475] **Mr. Paul Marsden** (Shrewsbury and Atcham): I am sure that my right hon. Friend is aware

that cancer is the No. 1 killer disease in England and Wales. Will he therefore join me in congratulating the Royal Shrewsbury hospital and local Shropshire charities on the wonderful care that they give cancer patients and their families? Can he update the House on the outcome of the meeting that he held last week with top cancer specialists, which gave a great boost to all those who are involved in the crusade against cancer?

The Prime Minister: One in four people will die of cancer. That is why the Government are committed to making our cancer services the best in the world. We have invested an extra £60 million directly in services for the three most common cancers, and are committing another £150 million to get state-of-the-art equipment in our hospitals, increasing the number of cancer specialists and providing up to 15,000 extra nurses, as well as increasing spending on cancer drugs. That is all part of the largest single increase in investment in the health service—the £21 billion—that any Government have ever made. Conservative Members may not like that, but it is the right thing to do, the country likes it, and it stands in contrast to the undermining of the health service by the Conservative party.

ROYAL ASSENT

Madam Speaker: I have to notify the House, in accordance with the Royal Assent Act 1967, that Her Majesty has signified Her Royal Assent to the following Acts:

Scottish Enterprise Act 1999

Rating (Valuation) Act 1999

Northern Ireland (Location of Victims' Remains) Act 1999

Kosovo

3.31 pm

The Secretary of State for Defence (Mr. George Robertson): Two months into NATO's campaign, I think that it is appropriate that I should report to the House, before it rises for the recess, on the Kosovo crisis.

Before I do so, I place on record the huge debt that we all owe the men and women of all three services and their civilian support, for their bravery, commitment and sheer hard work in support of NATO's efforts to help the refugees from Kosovo and to end the horror being inflicted by the Belgrade regime in Kosovo.

The men and women of our armed forces have seen with their own eyes the results of the horrific ethnic cleansing carried out by Milosevic's troops, the special police and the paramilitaries—the torture, the systematic rape, the murder and the eviction of more than 1 million people. They know that they are engaged in the pursuit of a just cause—the return of the evicted people of Kosovo to their homes in safety and security.

At the Washington summit at the end of April, NATO's political leaders took two important decisions on the future direction of the alliance's military strategy in Kosovo. First, they agreed to step up and intensify the air campaign. The results of that decision are daily becoming more evident, as NATO planes steadily weaken and progressively destroy the capability of Milosevic's forces and increase the pressure on him to accept a peace settlement based on NATO's conditions.

NATO's air campaign is working. During last week's debate, I gave some statistics about the amount of damage that we have already done to Yugoslav forces in Kosovo. Each day, we add more to the tally. Yesterday alone, NATO aircraft destroyed at least 15 artillery pieces, five tanks, a surface-to-air missile launcher and several artillery and mortar positions. On 22 May, the tally included at least 12 tanks and 11 armoured vehicles.

The overall losses inflicted on the Yugoslav forces are now estimated to include more than 110 combat aircraft. NATO estimates that that includes about 70 per cent. of the Mig-29s and about one quarter of the Mig-21s. These are the most combat-effective of the Yugoslav aircraft, and they represent a significant loss.

We have struck about 600 individual pieces of military equipment, more than half of them tanks, artillery and armoured personnel carriers. That constitutes about one third of the Serb heavy forces in Kosovo. We have destroyed 75 per cent. of Serbia's fixed surface-to-air missile sites and more than 12 per cent. of the mobile systems. We have struck more than a dozen command posts.

Those are the effects of the air campaign on the forces on the ground, which present the most challenging targets. The strategic targets include most of the primary road and rail bridges over which supplies must pass. We have attacked more than a third of all the fixed telecommunications sites, and we have repeatedly attacked airfields and hangars, and numerous ammunition and fuel storage sites and barracks.

All that represents a very effective air campaign, which is achieving the military objectives that we set at the outset of the campaign. The demonstrations, desertions and dissent that we have witnessed in recent days are evidence that ordinary Serbs are now questioning the policies of Milosevic and the damaging and unwinnable conflict with NATO into which he has led them.

The second Washington summit decision was to update NATO's plans for the deployment of ground forces. Air and ground options are sometimes described as though they are separate and different. That has never been the case. NATO has always planned for a ground force to ensure the safe return home of the refugees, once the air campaign has achieved its objective. We have already assembled a Kosovo Force of about 14,000 in Macedonia, including substantial contributions from France, Germany, Italy and the United Kingdom.

However, the massive destruction wrought by Milosevic's forces in Kosovo means that the originally planned total of 28,000 will no longer be adequate. On top of the task of creating a secure environment for the returning refugees, it is now necessary to plan on a much increased scale to assist with the re-establishment of the civil infrastructure, the provision of humanitarian aid and the clearance of land mines laid by Milosevic's forces. We are working with our partners to ensure that civil structures are in place to take on those tasks, but, inevitably, much of the early burden will fall to military forces.

The North Atlantic Council yesterday took note of a revised plan drawn up by NATO's military authorities, which, subject to more detailed planning, identifies a requirement for a force of about 45,000 to deal with the full range of tasks now envisaged. That figure excludes any additional forces that may be needed to provide essential national logistic support, which may raise the overall number to nearer 55,000 to 60,000. Further work to develop this military planning is going ahead within NATO.

The Kosovo Force plans will still need to be adapted as the situation on the ground changes and to take account of wider developments in the context of a political settlement. Discussions are taking place about the contributions that allies can make to such a force.

The British Government have made it clear that, as in Bosnia, we are keen to work with other nations that are prepared to provide military forces for KFOR. Given the need for NATO to be ready to react quickly to deploy into Kosovo in support of a peace settlement, the UK is today taking a number of steps on a national basis to ensure that we can move as soon as it is possible to get the refugees back home.

We have decided that the United Kingdom will make a substantial contribution to the planned force. That is consistent with the role that we have taken so far in the campaign and with our determination to see it brought to a quick and successful conclusion. We are determined that as many refugees as possible can return home before the winter closes in.

Because of the capability and deployability of our forces, the United Kingdom is well placed to contribute to that operation. Moreover, as the Framework Nation for the Allied Command Europe Rapid Reaction Corps—the ARRC—our initial contribution will inevitably be high. However, we envisage that the UK contribution to the force will reduce markedly after an initial deployment period of six months.

I am now reducing the notice to move of the three infantry battalion groups which, as previously announced, are undergoing training for possible operations in Kosovo.

[Mr. George Robertson]

The units concerned are the 1st Battalion, the Royal Irish Rangers; the 1st Battalion, the Parachute Regiment; and the 1st Battalion, the Royal Gurkha Rifles.

In addition, we are reducing the notice of 3 Commando brigade and the amphibious ready group, of a number of combat support groups, of two brigade headquarters, of elements of a divisional headquarters and of a number of RAF support helicopters and support units. I am placing in the Library of the House a full list of the units involved.

Precisely how many of those earmarked forces will be needed by NATO will depend on a number of factors—most important, what forces other allies are able to provide in the time required. Given the importance that NATO attaches to the early identification, training, commitment and deployment of additional forces, we judge it prudent to take those steps now to keep options open and to be ready to respond once firm requests are received from NATO. The geographical distance of the United Kingdom from the theatre of operations means that deployment times are inevitably longer for us than for most other allies.

In all, we are reducing the notice to move of more than 12,000 personnel, in addition to the 5,400 already deployed in Macedonia as part of the Kosovo implementation force and the 1,600 others committed to Kosovo operations. We are also taking steps to provide the equipment and material needed to support a force of that size and are making preparations to deploy the heavy equipment of the three infantry battalion groups and some combat support to the region next month.

Those are serious steps, and they will place great demands on all three services and on individual service men and their families, but they measure up to the seriousness of the situation confronting us in Kosovo. Let us remember that 1.5 million people—more than three quarters of the population of Kosovo—have been driven from their homes in terror. Our objective is to allow them to return home and rebuild their shattered lives in secure and civilised conditions and, in doing so, to show that the cruelty and brutality that we have seen in Kosovo over the past year will simply not be tolerated.

That is a major and a momentous undertaking which, in the coming months and years, will require a major investment of diplomatic, financial, humanitarian and military effort. The measures that I have announced today are a further demonstration of the Government's determination to play a full part in that historic effort.

Mr. John Maples (Stratford-on-Avon): I fully associate the Opposition with the support expressed by the Secretary of State for the work that our armed services are doing in the Balkans.

Last week in the Kosovo debate, my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Folkestone and Hythe (Mr. Howard) and I drew attention to what we saw as confusion at the heart of Government policy. Despite all the Foreign Secretary's travels and all the spinning during the past week, that confusion remains. Today's statement, although it announces the commitment of considerably more British troops to possible deployment in Macedonia, does nothing to clarify that confusion.

In the light of what he has said, can the Secretary of State confirm that the three battalion groups whose notice to move he has reduced are the same 2,000 soldiers who, he announced some weeks ago, were being assigned to KFOR in Macedonia? When does he expect them to be deployed? Is it true that the only way in which the 1st Battalion, the Parachute Regiment has been able to make up its numbers is by borrowing more than 150 people from the 3rd Battalion, the Parachute Regiment?

Last week, the Foreign Secretary went to Washington to remove the apparent split between the United Kingdom and the United States over ground troops. We were treated to a media double act by the Foreign Secretary and Mrs. Albright. We were told that they were at one, but, no sooner had the Foreign Secretary left, suggesting a new US willingness to use ground troops, than Mrs. Albright was denying any possibility of NATO entering Kosovo in anything other than a permissive environment.

All that has been agreed is a more realistically sized peacekeeping force at 48,000, although the Secretary of State has told us that that figure might rise to 60,000. The Government have been presenting that in the media as the basis of a possible invasion force, but, at yesterday's NATO force planning meeting, Ken Bacon, the Pentagon spokesman said:

"the force will be structured to provide plenty of non-military public security function to ensure the safe return of the refugees."

Today, he said:

"this is not a shadow invasion force."

Is it the basis of a possible invasion force or not?

The composition of the extra 20,000 troops apparently will take another full week to decide. Whatever happened to rapid reaction? It is now nine weeks since the bombing started. Only 14,000 of the 28,000 troops are actually in place in Macedonia. When does the Secretary of State expect the full 48,000—or now perhaps 60,000—to be available in theatre? Are the NATO forces in Albania included in the 48,000 total? How many of the 48,000 troops does he expect to be equipped and configured for war fighting, as opposed to peacekeeping?

The Government clearly still believe that we can achieve our aims only by the more aggressive use of ground troops, but none of our allies appears to share that view. The Foreign Secretary continues to talk of a "semi-permissive environment", to blur that division. However, I am advised that, in reality, there is no such thing. We either drive down the road into Kosovo as a peacekeeping force, or we enter configured for war fighting and prepared to meet resistance.

Javier Solana says that the alliance plans to bring the war to a close and return the refugees before the winter. We believe that that timetable is crucial. Two weeks ago, the Prime Minister agreed that the window of opportunity was very small, and that decisions would have to be made very soon. It seems to us that those decisions have not been made. The Government's preferred option of an early use of ground troops has probably been lost already through indecision over an issue that should have been resolved before we started.

Do we not appear now to be wholly reliant on the success of the bombing campaign? Of course, we must all hope that it will work, but I do not think that a single independent military expert believes that it will. Meanwhile, the flood of refugees continues, with all their evidence of Milosevic's revolting crimes. We want all those refugees to return to their homes. We want the Government to succeed in achieving that but, as I said last

week, we cannot go on as we have for the past eight weeks. The Government must develop a credible strategy. I see no evidence that that is happening. I only hope that there is still time for them to do so.

Mr. Robertson: I take that as support.

Mr. Maples: It was.

Mr. Robertson: I suppose that that qualified support is better than no support, which is what has been offered by some other hon. Members on the Conservative Front Bench.

I shall answer the questions that have been raised soberly, because there should be maximum unity in the House at this time. Frankly, there are many questions to which enormously detailed answers would be of more advantage to the opponents of the alliance than to the House. However, my military commanders and I have given the maximum information that we believe is reasonable and possible. We have been attacked in many quarters for giving too much information—an accusation that I take on the chin.

The hon. Gentleman first asked whether the three battalion groups that I have talked about today were the same 2,000 troops that we sent to Kosovo as part of the second battle group. No, they are not, and that should have been reasonably obvious. We announced that those three battalion groups had been put into training, with the potential of being available if NATO were to decide that a bigger force was needed.

The hon. Gentleman asked when those troops will be deployed. That is a matter for NATO, not for individual countries. I wish that the Opposition, when they respond, both in the House and outside it, to statements such as today's, would remember that the operation is being conducted by NATO. There are 19 countries in NATO. The hon. Gentleman is perfectly entitled to attack this Government in this House, but this is an alliance effort, and all the stronger for being so.

The hon. Gentleman asked whether I was aware that, if required, 1 Para would be able to deploy only if it borrowed from 3 Para. Of course I am aware of that. The hon. Gentleman should be aware that, in practically every operational context, now and during the previous Government's period in office, battalions deployed for operations in theatre are all backfilled.

I thought that the hon. Gentleman made too much fun of my right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary and the American Secretary of State, who last weekend showed the alliance solidarity that binds us together. On the very day that my right hon. Friend left Washington, the President of the United States wrote an article in *The New York Times* that made it clear that other military options existed and that no military option had been taken off the table. The hon. Gentleman may care to pick apart various phrases, but that is the reality of the alliance that we have today.

The shadow Defence Secretary claims that we suggested in the media that this is an invasion force, whereas we have said exactly the opposite. This is not an invasion force: it is a strengthened peace implementation force. That is a fact, and that is the reality of what we are doing. He asked when the troops would arrive in theatre. I have no intention of answering that question today, and anyway it depends on what the NATO military authorities ask us to provide from the earmarked troops.

The hon. Gentleman asked whether the total numbers include troops in Albania. Although the commander of the Albania force, General Reith, who is acting with enormous distinction and international praise, happens to be British, he is a NATO commander. He has some British support elements, but the vast majority of the troops in Albania, who are, after all, in the theatre, come from France, Italy and the United States.

The hon. Gentleman also asked about windows of opportunity. I should like to say to him and to anyone else who is listening, including people in Serbia, that there are plenty of windows of opportunity for us to act. We shall keep acting day on day until NATO's reasonable conditions have been satisfied.

The shadow Defence Secretary accused us of indecision, but I have come to the House of Commons today to show that NATO and this country's response can be decisive. This is a momentous day. We are strengthening the peace implementation force available to NATO to deploy when it is the right time for the refugees to go home. I should have thought that that measure deserved a more gracious welcome from Her Majesty's Opposition than it was given.

Mrs. Anne Campbell (Cambridge): Many people will be heartened to hear my right hon. Friend's statement about the necessary support to help refugees to go back to their homes in Kosovo. Will he outline the measures that will be taken to clean up and rebuild the civilian infrastructure, which will be necessary for the refugees to live a normal life once they get back home?

Mr. Robertson: My hon. Friend is right. The damage that has been done by Milosevic's marauding troops is considerable. As the G8 declaration clearly lays out, the social reconstruction of Kosovo will be a big task for all of us. That is one of the reasons why NATO felt that it was right and proper to increase the size of the forces required. Although civilian authorities will have to be put in place, the early burden will inevitably fall on the military. We shall have to be ambitious in what we do inside Kosovo if those traumatised people are to have a semblance of normality.

Mr. Menzies Campbell (North-East Fife): Following the Prime Minister's answer to the question put earlier by my right hon. Friend the Member for Yeovil (Mr. Ashdown), does the Secretary of State agree that it is not simply by numbers but by the composition of its forces that NATO will make clear to the Milosevic regime its determination that the refugees should be able to return and live in peace? Does he agree that the forces must be capable of sustained, high-intensity warfare and not only reconstruction, if NATO has to impose its will in a hostile environment to enable the return of the refugees before the onset of winter?

Does the right hon. Gentleman further agree that NATO's overall forces must be structured so as to be able to impose, and not just implement, peace, and must contain a preponderance of teeth arms? He told the House that he envisaged that the United Kingdom's contribution to the force would reduce markedly after an initial

[Mr. Menzies Campbell]

deployment period of six months. On what factors does he base that assessment, and from what date will that period run?

Mr. Robertson: The composition of whatever force is put in place will, of course, determine what that force can do. That is why we are being judicious in the troops that we send. Some of the troops who have been in the region since the beginning of the year are involved in high-intensity warfare, but such is the flexibility of our forces that, when the hundreds of thousands of human beings who have been evicted from their homes and from their homeland came across the border into Macedonia, those forces rose to the occasion and built the refugee camps. It is possible for troops trained for high-intensity warfare to move to a humanitarian role, and such skills will be necessary when we go into Kosovo to return people to their homes.

The picture that I have painted, and what I have said about the troops who have been earmarked, will have given the right hon. and learned Gentleman an idea of the problems that we expect our troops to face in Kosovo. Just one factor is the number of land mines that will have been sown by Milosevic, irresponsibly and illegally, during his occupation. They will pose a substantial risk to all incoming forces. The NATO structures will reflect the fact that, even in the most permissive circumstances, the environment will still be dangerous, and the fact that a wide range of capabilities will be required.

The deployment of the Allied Command Europe Rapid Reaction Corps in NATO doctrine is predicated on a deployment of six months, so that the corps can be available for other duties. The decision on when the clock starts to tick will be a matter for NATO, but the choice of a date for the corps to perform the task for which it was sent—returning the refugees—will be perfectly understandable.

Mr. Kevin McNamara (Hull, North): Many people will welcome today's announcement, especially given the common view that it was a silly error to suggest at the start of the bombings that land forces would not be sent in. That was indeed a major error, and it probably encouraged Milosevic.

Nevertheless, there are real fears that the refugees will not return to Kosovo this year, and that many will spend their time in Macedonia, Albania and elsewhere. Will my right hon. Friend give an undertaking that those who are exposed to the terrible winter conditions of the area will be adequately housed and fed, and will not be left in tented encampments?

Mr. Robertson: Notwithstanding my hon. Friend's welcome, I disagree with him about whether it was right or wrong to rule out a wholesale land invasion in the face of organised resistance in Kosovo at the outset. NATO—all 19 of the allies—made a careful and considered decision at the time about what was the best military option to deal with the circumstances that existed at the time. It is easy for some, with hindsight, to criticise the decisions that were made then, but I think that history will show that the right decisions were made.

We will return as many refugees as is humanly possible to Kosovo and their own homes, in safe and secure circumstances. The earlier that that can be done, the better it will be; and the sooner Milosevic recognises that he cannot defeat NATO and should settle on the basis of NATO's conditions, the sooner things will be settled for those human beings.

Sir Geoffrey Johnson Smith (Wealden): I welcome the statement, but does it not imply to some extent that we have—for the time being, at any rate—ruled out importing into the area troops capable of mounting an invasion? This is basically a force to implement peace when it has been established; it is nothing more or less than that.

Can the Secretary of State tell us who, apart from this country, is contributing to the force? Are the Americans or the Visegrad countries involved? To what extent is there an agreement in deed as well as in thought?

Mr. Robertson: This is a peace implementation force, but we—my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister, the President of the United States and NATO—have made it clear that all other options are on the table, and will be carefully considered. As for who will supplement and strengthen the implementation force, I believe that all the allies in NATO will be engaged. They are substantially involved in the present KFOR. There are clear indications that, at the force generation conference that will probably take place next week, most of the other countries in NATO will be substantially contributing, along with us.

Mr. Malcolm Wicks (Croydon, North): Although homelessness is a feature of all wars, does the Secretary of State agree that a unique feature of the war in Kosovo is that the vast majority of Kosovan people are now homeless—they either have been excluded from their country, or are homeless in the mountains? Therefore, he has the support of many of us in saying that we will need ground troops if the people are to return home in great numbers.

Will my right hon. Friend disregard the mocking of the British-American alliance by Her Majesty's Loyal Opposition, which must replay very well in the Belgrade media? Will he instead listen to the voice of decent British public opinion, which cannot stomach genocide in Europe and will support all that the Government do to combat it?

Mr. Robertson: I agree with my hon. Friend that the decent majority in this country—indeed, the overwhelming majority of public opinion—support what the Government are doing. They support our humanitarian objectives—we need constantly to emphasise that. However, those are more than humanitarian. If Milosevic were to get away with the genocide and with ethnic cleansing on such a grand scale, does anyone imagine that he would stop at Kosovo? Vojvodina would be the next place, and it would be hoovered out of ethnic Hungarians. What would happen to Montenegro? What would he do about Macedonia, next door?

There are good strategic reasons why we have to draw a line before Milosevic's ambitions. Those go side by side with the common humanity that we engage when we say that ethnic cleansing is absolutely unacceptable.

Ground troops have always been part of NATO's strategy. Air attacks and the ground troops that would escort the refugees back to their homes have been part and parcel of the twin-track policy that we have had from the beginning.

Sir Peter Emery (East Devon): After that last remark from the hon. Member for Croydon, North (Mr. Wicks), will the right hon. Gentleman understand that the Opposition are 100 per cent. behind our troops in the field and all the tasks that they have to achieve? Whatever questions may be asked of him, the support for what we have to do is complete and absolute, and he must know that.

Perhaps as an illustration of keeping up the morale of the troops in the Balkans, will the right hon. Gentleman show his support by doing everything possible to ensure that the anonymity of the military men who are called to give evidence to the new Bloody Sunday inquiry that has been instituted shall be maintained, and shall not be revealed to the IRA?

Mr. Robertson: I pay tribute to the right hon. Gentleman for the unwavering support that he has given to what the Government are doing in their present endeavour—part and parcel of a NATO alliance that is standing firm in the face of an enormous evil, the like of which we have not seen.

Madam Speaker: Order. I believe that the Secretary of State should not respond further. I was reading material relating to that matter at the time. It is sub judice.

Mr. Robertson: I was actually paying a compliment to the right hon. Member for East Devon (Sir P. Emery). I had not got to the element that involves sub judice. I am grateful for your prior warning, Madam Speaker.

Madam Speaker: The right hon. Gentleman can pay all the compliments that he likes to the right hon. Member for East Devon (Sir P. Emery), provided that he does not get on to the sub judice part of the question. I may have something to say about that later.

Mr. Robertson: I knew that I would be taking great risks if I got anywhere near the Bloody Sunday inquiry. I did not realise that I was treading in dangerous territory by daring to praise an Opposition Member, but he has always been robust in his support. I know that, contrary sometimes to the impressions that are given in the heat of the moment, the whole House supports those of our fighting forces who are out there risking life and limb for what they and we know to be a major national interest.

Mr. Harry Barnes (North-East Derbyshire): I have never had any problems in supporting attacks on military targets in Yugoslavia, and the Secretary of State has just spelt out the success of that type of bombing. What I am concerned about is the impact of bombing on civilians, as it seems to have gone way beyond what one might attribute to collateral or accidental damage. What criteria are used in determining civilian targets? Obviously schools, hospitals and housing are being hit only by accident; but there seems to have been an awful lot of bombing of bridges, factories, bus stations and railway stations, going beyond the principle of proportionality. Many of us would feel much easier if bombing were restricted entirely to military targets, with only occasional non-military damage.

Mr. Robertson: Life would be much easier for all of us if, in a country such as Yugoslavia, we could easily draw a line between that which is military and that which is military-commercial. Milosevic set out to create a military machine in which there was an intimacy between his military and every other aspect of society. Nevertheless, the rule of proportionality is a very severe guide to us, as is appropriateness. Therefore, all the targets being hit are related—appropriately and proportionately—to degrading and weakening the military machine that has caused the genocidal violence in Kosovo.

Mr. Andrew Robathan (Blaby): I also welcome the Secretary of State's presence in the House and his statement today. I can also assure him that, having seen the refugees in Albania and Macedonia, I wholeheartedly support the Government in their determination to get them back to Kosovo. I was tempted to ask why, if the air campaign is working so well, the volume of refugees being deported by Milosevic is increasing, rather than decreasing, but, my question is this: Before the bombing campaign began, did the Secretary of State receive advice from the Ministry of Defence that the bombing campaign on its own would not achieve the aims that he set out?

Mr. Robertson: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for making clear his support. I do not believe that anyone who—like him and me—has met the refugees could reach any conclusion other than that we had to act, and to do so very robustly indeed. He also asked a question that the Government are occasionally asked, on the military advice that we have received. The buck stops here: I am at the Dispatch Box, in the House of Commons, as the Secretary of State for Defence. There is in the United Kingdom civilian control of the military. I cannot hide behind the decisions taken by the military or the advice that I am given, because I am answerable to the House for the decisions that I take.

The decision to go ahead with the strategy that was adopted was taken not by the United Kingdom Government or by the United Kingdom military, but by 19 Heads of Government and 19 military commanders, with 19 democratic Parliaments behind them. I think that the hon. Gentleman can take it that the military advice that we received was the advice that we executed.

Mrs. Alice Mahon (Halifax): I join with every hon. Member in condemning ethnic cleansing, be it in Kosovo or the Krajina. However, does the Secretary of State accept that there are other victims of violence in this war? Is he aware that 30 per cent. of the 1,200 civilians killed in Yugoslavia by NATO bombs were children, and that 40 per cent. of the 5,000 injured were children? What would he say to the children of Nis who, before the war, attended the Playhouse—the English-teaching primary school? While I was on a brief visit to the school between bombing raids, those five and six-year-olds took down the Union flag—I have it here—from their school, and drew on it pictures of their experience of being bombed by NATO. Does he agree that they are just as much victims

[Mrs. Alice Mahon]

as the children in the camps? Is it not time to start concentrating on a political settlement, rather than talking up a ground war?

Mr. Robertson: I know that my hon. Friend holds her views with great sincerity and great passion, but she really has to see in her own mind who started this whole thing. Who was it who started to bombard villages in Kosovo? Who was it who drove ordinary people—civilians—from their homes and their villages into the hills and across the borders? Who has been involved in the murders and the rapes that have been a part of that systematic picture? We know who it was not only from the words of the victims themselves, but because we know what Milosevic's troops have done in other theatres of war.

I do not like any civilian casualties. I am sure that the statistics were given to my hon. Friend in good faith, but I do not believe that 30 per cent. of the civilian casualties in Yugoslavia have been children. I regret every civilian casualty. Every one was a mistake. None of them was targeted. Thousands upon thousands of innocent civilians—children, old people, men and women—have been brutalised directly and deliberately by Milosevic's troops and paramilitary thugs in Kosovo. When that stops and the refugees get back, we shall not have to carry out the bombing that has been necessary. We did not want to do it, but we had to.

Mr. Andrew Tyrie (Chichester): The Government can have my full support for the aims of the military action, but I am worried that they are willing the end but not the means. It has always seemed clear to an enormous number of us that bombing alone is very unlikely to achieve the Government's objectives. Might the increased forces that the Government are putting in place be used in a non-permissive environment, as defined by the Foreign Secretary?

Mr. Robertson: The troops announced by NATO are not an invasion force. That is clear from the numbers. They are a peace implementation force to escort the refugees back to their homes. We willed the end—an end to the violence and a peaceful and secure return home for those who have been driven from their homes. All the military commanders believed that that was the right way to proceed. That was endorsed by the politicians, who make the ultimate decisions. We are confident that, after eight weeks, the air attacks have caused huge damage to the Serb military. Dissent is increasing in Serbia. Many brave people of real substance are speaking out and deserve the support of all decent people in Yugoslavia. People are beginning to realise what has been done in their name in Kosovo. That is a major pressure towards the settlement for which we all hope.

Mr. David Winnick (Walsall, North): Should not the critics in the House and outside accept that the conflict can quickly come to an end once Belgrade signals its intention to accept an international military force that would allow all the refugees to return in safety and protect all the other civilians in Kosovo, including the Serb minority? Perhaps the critics could try to persuade Belgrade of that. Two months after the start of NATO's military intervention, the majority support in the country for what we are doing has been maintained because the people know, as we do, that to stand aside while such terrible crimes and atrocities were being committed in Kosovo would have brought lasting shame to this country and to our European allies.

Mr. Robertson: My hon. Friend speaks with authority and consistency. We are taking action only because of the genocidal violence practised by Milosevic and the Belgrade regime. When that ends and the conditions are accepted, the bombing can and will stop. The conditions are not onerous. They are simply that there should be an end to the violence, the withdrawal of the Serb troops and the acceptance of a political process and an international security force to allow the refugees to come home. Those were all component parts of United Nations Security Council resolution 1199, passed last September. That list of demands is endorsed by the vast majority of the international community. The demands make sense, they are humane and they would impose no more on Milosevic than his human obligation.

Sir Archie Hamilton (Epsom and Ewell): Why do the Prime Minister and the Defence Secretary continue to talk about allowing Kosovans to go back to their homes when they know quite well that many of them have no homes to go to for the simple reason that they have been burnt or razed to the ground by the Serbs? Why should the Kosovans be so much keener on returning to Kosovo than the Bosnians were to return to Bosnia, where some 1 million people were displaced and only 78,000 have gone back? Would the Secretary of State not do better to assume that hundreds of thousands of refugees will be left in refugee camps this winter, and start providing the shelter that they will need to withstand the rigours of the Balkan winter, instead of adding to their agony by allowing hundreds of thousands to freeze to death?

Mr. Robertson: We have to make arrangements for refugees who may well have to spend the winter in the cold of the Balkans. That is sensible contingency planning and it has already started. However, the clear intention is to get refugees back to their homes and villages—despite the damage that has been done and the fact that some of their houses and villages no longer exist—because that is what they want. They say that they will rebuild their homes and keep their communities together and that they have no intention of leaving the land of their forefathers. We have no right to make assumptions about what should happen to them. Not all the analogies with Bosnia are correct; some are, especially in respect of the violence that Milosevic was willing to perpetrate there, which gives us an indication of what he did to human beings in Kosovo. However, 90 per cent. of the population of Kosovo were Albanian by extraction. They know how to go back and where to go back to, and their houses have not been occupied. It will be a difficult and painstaking process, but it will happen.

Ms Dari Taylor (Stockton, South): I thank my right hon. Friend for his statement to the House today and warmly welcome the peace implementation plan. Will he take as an example the tremendous work of our Territorials and Reservists in Bosnia and consider the extensive value and use they could be to a reconstruction

plan in Kosovo? Will he give them adequate warning so that they can put their lives in order before their call-up papers arrive?

Mr. Robertson: I congratulate my hon. Friend on the consistency of her message. We certainly have not forgotten our Reserve forces who continue to play a distinguished role in Bosnia. Many of them will be valuable and important in the potential implementation force that is being set up and strengthened for Kosovo. They will undoubtedly have a role there too.

Sir Peter Tapsell (Louth and Horncastle): Is it intentional or unintentional that the Secretary of State always leaves the strategy of NATO—if it has one—very unclear? After 60 days and nights of bombing, the tragic truth is that not a single Kosovan Albanian has been saved. If the military capacity of Serbia has been so much reduced, as the right hon. Gentleman suggested in his opening remarks, it is difficult to believe that, in a permissive situation, it would be necessary to increase the number of troops from 28,000 to 60,000.

On the other hand, if, as I strongly suspect, we shall ultimately go into an opposed invasion, 60,000 troops will be wholly inadequate. On 23 March, the Prime Minister admitted in the House that if we had to take on the Serbian Army we would require at least 200,000 troops. So we are getting the worst of both worlds. As I said to the Prime Minister on 23 March, it is time for the Government to come clean with the British people and tell us what they really intend to do.

Mr. Robertson: When I hear such questions, I wonder whether some people are looking forward to failure. The strategy has been clear from the start. The intention is to stop the violence in Kosovo and to get the refugees back in safety and security to the land of their ancestors. That is the strategy to which the 19 NATO countries have subscribed. It has been clear, open and transparent—perhaps too transparent—from the word go. That is exactly our intention.

I have made it clear, in this House and outside, that this is not an invasion force but a peace implementation force, strengthened for the reasons that I have given. In the new circumstances following the eight weeks of the air campaign and the carnage wrought by Milosevic in Kosovo, it is the belief of the military authorities that we need more people to be ready to escort the refugees back.

The hon. Gentleman says that not a single Kosovar has been saved. Perhaps he should take the opportunity to go to some of the places in this country where there are Kosovar refugees—if he cannot make the journey to Macedonia or to Albania—and ask them how many lives have been saved and how many people were not put to the bayonet because of NATO forces. Perhaps he should hear the acclaim with which NATO has been greeted as the only saviours of the Kosovar people. We will get those evicted people back to their homes.

Mr. Tam Dalyell (Linlithgow): Although it has taken place in a sparse House, in 37 years I have not heard a more momentous or far-reaching statement from a Minister. It must be about a land war of uncertain outcome in the Balkans on which we are embarking.

What is the port situation? Are we going to be guaranteed the use of the port of the Piraeus, because the mayor of Athens has said that not a finger would be lifted by the dockers? Are we going to have the facility at Salonika? If not, how is such a force to be supported?

On the question of cluster bombs, the Secretary of State justifiably can claim considerable credit for his work on land mines. Cluster bombs are not so very different from land mines. What is the justification for their use? The Secretary of State talked about the refugees returning to Kosovo. Could I ask a factual question? In the knocking-out of tanks, what has been the assessment of the use of depleted uranium?

The Secretary of State has referred to Hungarian ethnic minorities in Vojvodina. Is there a suggestion that they are subject to the possibility of ethnic cleansing? If so, what can we do about it, other than occupy Serbia? Is there on the agenda an option for the occupation of Serbia?

Finally—

Madam Speaker: Order. The hon. Gentleman must understand that others are seeking to ask questions. I realise the seriousness with which we all take this matter, but he must bring his questioning to a conclusion.

Mr. Dalyell: All right, Madam Speaker.

Mr. Robertson: I do not think that I shall persuade my hon. Friend the Member for Linlithgow (Mr. Dalyell), who has made up his mind that we should not be involved in this military action at all. If he is willing to stand back while people are massacred, that is a matter for him and his conscience.

The port situation and where any potentially enhanced force will be based are matters for the NATO authorities and the countries involved. I would like to pay tribute to the Government of Greece, who have allowed the use of the port of Thessaloniki for the troops that are at present in Macedonia. I pay tribute also to the Governments of Macedonia—a tiny and fragile country, which has hosted so many of our troops because it believes in the interests that we are promoting—and Albania, which has absorbed 400,000 refugees: that is equivalent of the whole population of the island of Ireland being absorbed into mainland Britain. Those are extraordinary achievements by those countries, which deserve our thanks and congratulations.

Our forces will be supported wherever they are. They have been up to now, and they will be in the future. My hon. Friend asked about cluster bombs. They have existed for some time, and they are the means that we have against the forces that are at present deployed inside Kosovo, who are deliberately targeting civilians and causing mayhem. Not only are people raped and tortured, and men beaten, as we saw so vividly on television at the weekend, but who knows what other horrors are going on.

Depleted uranium is not used in any of the munitions currently being used in Kosovo or in the Yugoslav theatre.

My hon. Friend asked about the Hungarian minority in Vojvodina. If he were listened to for military advice, all the ethnic Albanians would be swept out of Kosovo, and Milosevic would not stop there: the minority in Vojvodina

[Mr. Robertson]

would certainly be expelled and the last flickering elements of democracy in Montenegro snuffed out, after which Milosevic would be on the trail for other victims.

Mr. Douglas Hogg (Sleaford and North Hykeham): The Secretary of State said that he had received military advice to the effect that it is now necessary to have more military forces to escort the refugees back into Kosovo. Does he accept that that implies that we are likely to meet greater resistance than was previously anticipated? Does it not follow that what he is doing in reality is to guard, and possibly provide, against the opposition of the Serbs? In short, we are talking about an invasion against resistance.

If that is right, or even likely to be right, should not the Secretary of State ask, on a substantive motion, for the authority of the House to underpin such an operation?

Mr. Robertson: The right hon. and learned Gentleman was Minister of State, Foreign and Commonwealth Office in the previous Government, and was specifically in charge of the Balkans. I was a shadow foreign affairs spokesman for about 11 years, and I do not remember substantive motions being tabled about the military action that NATO, rightly and properly, took in Bosnia, through IFOR, to ensure that the Serb violence was ended there.

We will leave that to one side, because according to the Leader of the Opposition we are not allowed to talk about history: apparently, the previous Government did not exist. The fact is, as I have said, that this is not an invasion force but a strengthened implementation force, designed by the NATO military authorities and endorsed by the North Atlantic Council for the good, sensible and practical reasons that they believed made it absolutely necessary to have a force in place that is relevant to the circumstances that our troops will face when they take the refugees back into Kosovo.

Mr. Nigel Griffiths (Edinburgh, South): Will my right hon. Friend accept the congratulations of the House on the judicious leadership that the Government have shown in NATO? Will he ensure that ground troops are deployed as quickly as is practical and prudent, to secure the safe return of hundreds of thousands of Kosovar refugees?

Mr. Robertson: I am very pleased to accept my hon. Friend's congratulations, not only because there is no politician who does not like to be flattered but because he has been to the refugee camps in the region, met the people there and listened to the tales of horror, but also the tales of hope about what NATO has done and can do in the future. Their only hope is that NATO will—as it will—prevail.

Mr. Julian Brazier (Canterbury): In the light of the Secretary of State's earlier answer, in which he referred to the need to backfill units deployed into action, and his answer to the hon. Member for Stockton, South (Ms Taylor) on the use of Territorials and Reservists in Bosnia, can he confirm that, throughout the country, units that are being reduced to a small fraction of their present size are receiving requests to send volunteers to the Balkans, including for example the Green Jackets Support Weapons Unit in Oxfordshire and 289 Commando Battery in the east end of London? Is he planning a compulsory call-out of Territorials?

Mr. Robertson: The purpose of restructuring and modernising the Territorial Army was to make it more usable, more deployable, and therefore much more useful in the sort of situation in which we find ourselves in Kosovo today. I hear no suggestions that we should reverse the reforms that we have put in place. On the contrary, I have heard from various parts of the country the clear message that what we set out to do, and what we are delivering in terms of strengthening the Territorial Army, is precisely what the Territorial Army will be good at in the future. I hope that the hon. Gentleman will take that message back to the country.

Mr. Jeremy Corbyn (Islington, North): May I take the Defence Secretary back to the reply that he gave a few moments ago in response to a question from my hon. Friend the Member for Linlithgow (Mr. Dalyell) in which my right hon. Friend asserted that depleted uranium shells are not being used by British forces? Will he confirm that NATO forces are using them and that they have a long-term carcinogenic effect both on the victims at whom they are directed and on society as a whole? Will the Defence Secretary confirm also that it is part of NATO's strategy to bomb oil refineries, chemical factories and industrial plants, in the full knowledge that the resulting danger of pollution is enormous and horrendous and that that pollution will not stop at national boundaries but affect and destroy natural life and the health of people throughout the region? Will the Defence Secretary confirm that cluster bombs—about which my hon. Friend the Member for Linlithgow inquired—are, in effect, mines dropped from the sky and that they will be a curse on the people of that region for many decades to come?

Mr. Robertson: It will be nice—and, gosh, will I welcome it!—when my hon. Friend comes to the Chamber and denounces the violence perpetrated against women and children inside Kosovo.

Cluster bombs are not covered by the Ottawa treaty. They are not anti-personnel land mines and they are not covered even by the annexes to that treaty, which was negotiated with enormous care in order to take account of those munitions that might qualify under the original campaign.

I have made it clear that we are not using shells with depleted uranium in Kosovo or in the theatre of action at present. My hon. Friend made several assertions, none of which he can back up with peer-reviewed scientific research. We are undertaking considerable research into the allegations made about the effect of considerable amounts of depleted uranium that are alleged to have been used in the Gulf war. We believe the health risks are very small, but we will consider carefully any reliable medical or scientific data that may emerge concerning the incidence of ill-health that might have been caused by the use of depleted uranium in Iraq.

I remind the House that depleted uranium has many civilian uses and that several thousand tonnes of depleted uranium are in civil hands in this country. It is used for

radiation shielding in hospital radiotherapy departments and in the manufacture of counterbalance weights for yacht keels and aircraft, among other things.

Mr. Crispin Blunt (Reigate): The Defence Secretary's answer to the right hon. and learned Member for North-East Fife (Mr. Campbell) will come as a depressing surprise to the 5,000 men deployed with the ARRC and KFOR, who will be disappointed to learn that the clock is not ticking on their expected six-month deployment on an emergency operation. The Defence Secretary has acknowledged the horrendous problem of overstretch in the armed forces. Can he confirm that, despite the fact that training and the recruitment campaign have been a success, the Army is still suffering a net outflow of personnel? Can he confirm also that the day before the 6th Battalion and the Light Infantry were told of their amalgamation into the West of England Regiment, they were asked for 200 volunteers to reinforce the Army? The Defence Secretary has told us that 18,600 men and women are now dedicated to the operation in Kosovo. How long can the armed forces sustain that level of commitment, given that they have no idea when deployment to Kosovo will occur, as that decision remains in the hands of Mr. Milosevic?

Mr. Robertson: The members of the armed forces whom I have met are a lot more optimistic and determined than the hon. Gentleman. As I have travelled around the country and visited the theatre of operations, those personnel have delivered one message about the Conservative Member of Parliament who had the effrontery—the effrontery to them—to call, in the middle of a conflict, for the resignation of the Chief of the Defence Staff. They find that extraordinary and offensive. I hope that the hon. Gentleman feels properly shamed about even making that suggestion about such a distinguished soldier.

A number of the troops who were in Macedonia have returned, so that roulement is already taking place because we believe that it is right and proper. Those who will augment the troops in due course will have the same commitment and dedication to the cause.

There are on-going problems of retention in the armed forces—after all, we inherited serious problems from the previous Government—but recruitment to the armed forces has substantially increased. My hon. Friend the Minister for the Armed Forces must take credit for much of that. I assure the hon. Gentleman that the British Army, of which he was once a member, believes that it can sustain the operations that it is undertaking despite the strain, because it knows that what it is doing is right.

Mr. William Ross (East Londonderry): Does the Minister understand the concern that some of us feel whenever he tells us that the number of British troops deployed will depend mainly on the forces made available by our allies? Is not the situation far too open-ended for this country to enter into, given the number of troops that we have available? We have a number of reinforcement troops for service in Northern Ireland and we have commitments in the Falklands and in the middle east—any one of those places could blow up at any time. Will the Minister keep that firmly in mind when he considers the commitments that the nation is making to the Balkans?

Will the Minister explain exactly what is the difference between a peace implementation force and an invasion force, because fighting is almost certain to begin as soon as those men cross the frontier?

Mr. Robertson: No, it is not, and a peace implementation force is exactly what it says it is: it is configured, and its numbers are designed, with that purpose in mind. The hon. Gentleman comes from Northern Ireland and knows how much the Province depends on the British Army's presence. That is a commitment that it has fulfilled well over the years, and it is an undiminished commitment that will not in any way be affected by what we have to do in the Balkans. Of course, as the Defence Secretary, I have to weigh up all the commitments that this country has and all the pressures on our armed forces before I make decisions about the deployment of our troops. That is why, when we make these announcements, we do so after very careful consideration.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Madam Speaker: Order. We now come to the business statement.

Sir Peter Emery (East Devon): On a point of order, Madam Speaker.

Madam Speaker: Points of order come after statements. I call the Leader of the House to make the business statement.

Business of the House

4.38 pm

The President of the Council and Leader of the House of Commons (Mrs. Margaret Beckett): With permission, Madam Speaker, I should like to make a short business statement. The main business for Wednesday 9 June will now be as follows: a debate on the White Paper on reforming the House of Lords on a motion for the Adjournment of the House. The remaining stages of the Health Bill will now be taken on Monday 14 June, and business for Tuesday 8, Thursday 10 and Friday 11 June will be as previously announced.

Sir George Young (North-West Hampshire): The Opposition have no difficulty with the change of business. Indeed, we welcome the debate on the House of Lords, for which we have been calling for some time. When the right hon. Lady announced provisionally that we would consider the Health Bill on the first Wednesday after the recess, I asked if we could have an assurance that the Government amendments would be tabled today, in time for that. Does the change of business mean that we can anticipate a large number of Government amendments to the Bill?

Mrs. Beckett: No. The right hon. Gentleman has perhaps forgotten that although he has been asking for a debate on the White Paper on Lords reform, that had to be moved as a result of the Opposition's handling of the Welfare Reform and Pensions Bill. He may have forgotten also that, as reported in column 1213 of *Hansard* on 20 May, he asked me for adequate time for the Government and the Opposition to table amendments to the Health Bill. It is in recognition of the fact that all amendments would have had to be tabled before the recess—by today—if they were to be taken on 9 June that the Government have moved the consideration of the Health Bill. As it transpires, consideration in Committee was due to end only yesterday. The Bill is not likely to be reprinted until today. So, the Government took the view that the arrangement would be unsatisfactory. It is a question not of the number of amendments but of the House having rather more time to consider those that are required.

Mr. Denis MacShane (Rotherham): My right hon. Friend is well known as a fan of Derby County, whose ground—I think—lies in her constituency. She will know that that team has moved up and down divisions over the years. Will she find time for a debate on the rules governing promotion and demotion in the Rugby Football Union—

Madam Speaker: Order. The statement was very narrow. If the hon. Gentleman had listened carefully he would have realised that it has changed the business for only one day. On such a narrow statement, his question must be very specific.

Mr. MacShane: My right hon. Friend's statement did cover the business for the following week, Madam Speaker. May I ask for a frisson, a fraction, a soupçon of time to consider the problem of rugby union clubs moving between divisions, since many of us feel that there is a closed shop of clubs in the north of England which is determined to allow no team, particularly Rotherham, to move into the first division? Rotherham has climbed through seven divisions in 15 years, yet it has been blocked for the third time—

Madam Speaker: Order. The hon. Member might apply to me for an Adjournment debate.

Mr. Nicholas Winterton (Macclesfield): Because a day's business was changed recently, for reasons that are well known to the House, the Government have rightly provided time for a debate on the White Paper on reform of the House of Lords, which I welcome. Does the Leader of the House accept that the report published on Monday by the Procedure Committee, which I chair, on the procedural consequences of devolution is also very important, and that time should also be found for a very early debate on it?

Mrs. Beckett: I am always conscious of the importance of reports of the Procedure Committee, but I fear that I cannot undertake to find time for the debate that the hon. Gentleman requested.

Mr. Tam Dalyell (Linlithgow): My question will appeal to you, Madam Speaker, because it is so specific. On 21 January 1991, the House debated a substantive motion on war in relation to Iraq. The Leader of the House has repeatedly said—doubtless in good faith—that such a debate in a war situation is without precedent. In the light of that precedent, particularly given the Defence Secretary's announcement and, indeed, the Indian view on the situation in Yugoslavia which I had the opportunity to outline this morning, which is rather different from the received wisdom, will she reflect on whether there should be a debate on a substantive motion on the war situation in Yugoslavia?

Mrs. Beckett: With respect to my hon. Friend, I think that he has overlooked the very careful wording that I have always sought to use. He has pressed for—quite legitimately, although as he will be aware, I have not been prepared to vary the precedent—a sort of prior authorisation for the use of armed forces. I am aware of the Iraq precedent; in fact, I have mentioned it on at least one of the many occasions on which this point has, in a variety of ways, been raised, and pointed out the special circumstances of it. It was tabled by the then Government, at the request of the then Opposition, because of much press comment that sought to imply that the Opposition were opposed to action in the Gulf. The Opposition wished to demonstrate their support for our armed forces.

Mr. John Townend (East Yorkshire): Now that the right hon. Lady has changed the business, will she please Ruth Pickles, one of my constituents from Upper Cranswick, by providing time for a debate on the strategic exports White Paper?

Mrs. Beckett: I am certainly very mindful of interest in the strategic exports White Paper. However I fear that I cannot undertake to find time for a debate on it in the very near future.

Mr. Eric Forth (Bromley and Chislehurst): Could not the Leader of the House please squeeze in a brief debate

in the week following the recess on a subject that should be dear to the Prime Minister, but apparently is not? Will she ensure that the Prime Minister is present for a debate on the difference between pupil:teacher ratios and average secondary and primary class sizes, because it is perfectly obvious from what the right hon. Gentleman said earlier that he does not have a clue about any of these things and—no doubt inadvertently and through ignorance—grossly misled the House? May we have a brief debate in the presence of the Prime Minister, so that he can learn about these things before he talks rubbish in the House of Commons?

Mrs. Beckett: I fear that I cannot undertake to provide what will be a completely unnecessary debate on that subject. From memory—because I do not have the figures with me—the Prime Minister was asked about average class sizes, and the answer that he gave was completely correct. I know that it does not suit Opposition Members.

Mr. Patrick McLoughlin (West Derbyshire): As the health debate is not to be held on Wednesday, will the Leader of the House arrange for the Health Secretary to make a statement to the House, so that he may explain why waiting lists for Southern Derbyshire Acute Hospitals NHS trust have increased, for referrals from GPs to consultants, from more than 1,500 in March 1977 to more than 3,200 in March 1999? People are obliged to wait a considerable time even to see a GP in southern Derbyshire. I am sure that such a statement will interest the right hon. Lady, too.

Mrs. Beckett: No. I fear I cannot undertake to press my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Health to make a statement about the affairs of one part of the country, important though it may be.

Miss Anne McIntosh (Vale of York): I wonder whether the Leader of the House could make time on Wednesday 9 June to discuss the plight of junior hospital doctors and explain to my constituents why that one category is deemed to be exempt from the safety provisions of the working time directive, which are meant to apply to every other profession.

Mrs. Beckett: Considering that the Conservative party opposes the working time directive root and branch, it is extraordinary that the hon. Lady has asked that question. I simply point out to her that the Government are determined to reduce the working hours of junior hospital doctors, have done so and will continue to do so.

Mr. Douglas Hogg (Sleaford and North Hykeham): The right hon. Lady is moving the business for Wednesday 9 June. Will she consider holding a debate on the number and the cost of Scottish Ministers? Has she read the *Hansard* record of Scottish questions yesterday? If she has, she will have noticed that, in relation to all nine questions reached, Scottish Ministers replying said that, as from 1 July, the matter would be a matter for the devolved Parliament in Scotland, not for them. That being so, what have Scottish Ministers got to do? Should not the House have the opportunity to consider whether the number and the cost of Scottish Ministers should be substantially reduced?

Mrs. Beckett: No; I am not prepared to find time for a debate on that subject. I thought that my right hon. Friend the new Secretary of State for Scotland yesterday dealt admirably with that point and those Members who made that point.

Mr. Edward Garnier (Harborough): The Leader of the House has announced that the remaining stages of the Health Bill will now be dealt with on Monday 14 June. Will the Health Bill be allowed more than one day, or will there be one day for Report and Third Reading? Can the right hon. Lady tell me—I have an interest in the subject, as Opposition spokesman on the Access to Justice Bill—what effect that will have on the likely date for Report and Third Reading of the Access to Justice Bill? A rumour was generated in the House yesterday that the Access to Justice Bill Report stage taken would be in the week beginning 14 June. I wonder whether she has any information about that which she would care to share with the House and the wider public.

Mrs. Beckett: I fear I am not in a position to help the hon. and learned Gentleman with that information. The expectation is that a day will be provided for the remaining stages of the Health Bill, as was the original arrangement; it is simply that it is a different day. I am afraid that, at the moment, I cannot enlighten the hon. and learned Gentleman about the Access to Justice Bill. If I am able to do so, I will do so.

Point of Order

4.49 pm

Mr. Douglas Hogg (Sleaford and North Hykeham): On a point of order, Madam Speaker. I am grateful to you for allowing me to raise a point of order with reference to the question that I asked at Northern Ireland questions. I shall not strain your patience by reminding the House of precisely what I said, but the question was directed to Government policy—whether immunity from prosecution should be given. It had absolutely nothing to do with the role of the paratroopers, with the evidence to be called, or with the question to be determined by those presiding over the inquiry. My understanding, culled from page 383 of the latest edition of "Erskine May", was that the 1972 resolution of the House permitted Members to raise questions relating to the conduct of Ministers, even if there was a tangential reference to some judicial inquiry in progress.

You may not wish to give a ruling today, Madam Speaker, but perhaps at some stage you will be in a position to give a little more guidance so that, I, at least, do not inadvertently transgress and try your patience.

Madam Speaker: I shall respond immediately to the right hon. and learned Gentleman, and remind him, as I am sure he is aware, that the purpose of the sub judice rule is to avoid any element of interference by the House in the work of the courts and the rights of those who are answering charges made against them.

Reference in debate to the status of witnesses appearing before an inquiry under the Tribunals and Inquiries Act 1992 may, even if the right hon. and learned Gentleman's interests are elsewhere, have implications for the conduct of that inquiry and its outcome. I am sure that he will agree that that would be wrong.

I understand that the right hon. and learned Gentleman is interested in, and has read, a debate in another place, but let me tell him, and the rest of the House, that the sub judice rule in the other place is not, I understand, exactly the same as that which governs proceedings in this House. In any case, I believe that their lordships were at that time considering legislation, when in both Houses the sub judice rule does not apply.

Sir Peter Emery (East Devon): Further to that point of order, Madam Speaker. I apologise for not having given you notice of my intention, but the matter arose during Question Time, and it became impossible for me to give you notice. You know, as I do, what a minefield the sub judice rule is in the House, and its implications for the way in which the occupant of the Chair has to rule. I understand that only too well.

However, what I was trying to do, which was ruled out of order because of the sub judice rule, was to ask the Minister a question about his actions in defending those who might be called to give evidence. I was not attempting to interfere with the court or the judge; I was attempting to assist the court to ensure that there was a greater chance that evidence could be given freely by those called to give it, in that their anonymity would be protected.

I was emphasising the judgment that a Minister could make before the actual operation of the court and the sub judice rule. I would have hoped that that would have met the application of the rules in "Erskine May".

Madam Speaker: I quite understand the right hon. Gentleman's argument; I was very concerned while he was putting his question. May I repeat that even if the right hon. Gentleman's interests are elsewhere, as he genuinely tried to explain to the House that they were, what he wanted to say could still have had implications for that inquiry and its outcome, and that would be wrong. I have gone carefully into the sub judice rule, and I seek to protect the House, as I also seek to protect witnesses and courts elsewhere.

Sustainable Energy Agency

4.53 pm

Mr. Gareth R. Thomas (Harrow, West): I beg to move,

That leave be given to bring in a Bill to establish a sustainable energy agency to promote renewable energy generation and encourage energy efficiency; and for related purposes.

The case for a sustainable energy agency involves three elements—more jobs, lower energy costs and significant reductions in carbon dioxide emissions. Sustainable energy is more labour-intensive than the more conventional fossil fuel and nuclear energy industries. Investment in energy efficiency, such as combined heat and power—CHP—and some renewable energy investment, including net metering, will help to lower business and domestic energy costs, which is especially important for those who suffer from fuel poverty.

As more than two thirds of the United Kingdom's carbon dioxide emissions come from non-transport energy production, sustainable energy has a key role to play in reducing the threat of climate change. Sustainable energy is the proof that economics and the environment mix, and that markets can achieve environmental solutions while delivering crucial economic and social benefits too. An agency would champion the drive to increase our renewable energy capacity, promote energy efficiency and facilitate CHP development in order to meet Government targets and build on the excellent renewables review, the positive work of the Energy Savings Trust and the coming climate change levy.

The agency would be a non-departmental public body, accountable to Government and the House, co-ordinating funding, research and business advice, acting as a resource point for other Government Departments and statutory bodies, able to argue for sustainable energy options and providing a focal point for the development of our domestic sustainable energy industry.

Sustainable energy agencies are not new. The Green Alliance, whose report provided some of the background to the Bill, highlighted the sustainable energy development authority, or SEDA, in New South Wales, and Novem, the Netherlands agency for energy and the environment.

SEDA has promoted the commercialisation and increased use of sustainable energy technologies. Novem's role has been to bring together all the stakeholders involved in energy efficiency to stimulate energy efficiency techniques and technologies. It has been a key factor in the Netherlands' success in doubling its long-term energy efficiency rate. SEDA's green power accreditation scheme and energy smart business programme have locked in 180 new partners and the investment of more than 31 million Australian dollars in energy efficiency, and have stimulated rapid growth in the Australian solar and wind energy industries.

We, however, are a long way from making a reality of our sustainable energy potential. The United Kingdom generates just 2 per cent. of its energy from renewable sources. To reach our target of 10 per cent. of electricity from renewables by 2010, about 500 MW of new capacity would need to be brought on-line every year for the next decade. On the trends of the past five years, that would be challenging, to put it mildly.

Although the NFFO—non-fossil fuel obligation—process has been extremely successful in driving down the costs of renewable energy, the actual level of installed capacity has been disappointing.

One of the major obstacles to promoting renewables, energy efficiency and CHP is the confusing institutional set-up for sustainable energy. The Green Alliance charted 15 different Government-funded institutions or initiatives, many of them doing an excellent job within their specific remit, ranging from Government Departments, quangos and research agencies through to private sector companies.

A key reason for such fragmentation is that the institutions have developed on an ad hoc basis in response to new policy goals over time. There is no single cohesive body offering a clear message which brings together government, academics and industry to co-ordinate the delivery of energy efficiency, renewables and CHP policy. Some, but not all, of the technologies have their own separate trade associations. A sustainable energy agency would help to deliver joined-up thinking and partnership, working across Whitehall and with other players to develop a strong sustainable energy industry.

There is huge potential in Britain. The energy technology support unit—ETSU—estimated that the cost-effective energy efficiency potential equalled 11 per cent. of projected energy demand in 2010. In offshore wind alone, Britain has enough potential to support our electricity needs three times over.

For industry to have the confidence to invest in renewable capacity in the UK, it must have confidence in the stability of local conditions, the regulatory position must improve, and industry must have confidence in the organisations with which it deals. A sustainable energy agency would help to lock in that stability and expertise to grow our domestic sustainable energy industry.

As part of its work programme, the agency would be well placed to co-ordinate a strong export programme to increase Britain's share of world markets, which for wind and solar now approach £1 billion a year each. Both markets are set to double over the next three years—a rate of growth comparable to sales of mobile phones and internet services. Mark Moody Stuart, chairman of the British arm of Shell, stated in his annual report to shareholders last year:

"Renewable energy sources—wind, biomass and solar—could be supplying a tenth of the world's energy by 2020 and half by 2050."

I am told that Shell's research predicted a quadrupling of the demand for electricity by 2050. That, by any definition, is a sizeable potential market. The European Union White Paper on energy stated that doubling the share of renewables in Europe alone would create between 500,000 and 900,000 new jobs. The small wind energy industry has already created more than 30,000 jobs in Europe.

We in Britain lead the world in a number of renewable technologies—for example, in wave power and in certain forms of biomass. A sustainable energy agency would be ideally positioned to facilitate, in partnership with Departments and perhaps using climate challenge fund resources, powerful programmes to exploit our renewables potential in world markets.

There are, too, many sustainable energy options that are local, small-scale and supported, or perhaps even part-owned, by local communities. A sustainable energy

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agency would not only be able to promote the interests of the larger renewables and CHP players, but could help to facilitate easier access to the grid for smaller renewables providers.

In May 1997, Greenpeace, together with the Peabody Trust, installed 30 solar panels on three low-income homes in Silvertown in London. Each home was projected to save a third off its electricity bill—about £60 a year. London Electricity offered the tenants less than 3p per kilowatt hour for the electricity they exported to the grid while charging them 8p per kilowatt hour when they needed electricity from the grid. That, together with the insistence that new meters be installed to measure the exported electricity, would have brought about the daft scenario of the tenants owing money to the LEB for the privilege of exporting electricity to its grid.

Net or reversible metering solutions could be promoted by a sustainable energy agency to help to resolve that type of market disincentive. Such an agency could also develop programmes to help to educate young people about sustainable energy and to help City investors to understand the industry. It could act as a source of advice for those, such as Grimsdyke first and middle school in my constituency, who are applying to be part of the Department of Trade and Industry's Scolar programme and looking for the necessary matched funding.

A sustainable energy agency is strongly supported by industry. British BioGen, the biomass trade association, offered unequivocal support, and the British Photovoltaic Association said, "Please highlight our support for the creation of a sustainable energy agency." The British Wind Energy Association also offered support in principle. The director of the Combined Heat and Power Association said:

"Creating an agency dedicated to the task of securing the deployment of sustainable energy should be a key part of the UK's modernisation agenda."

Sustainable energy offers the combination of significant environmental benefits and huge economic and social benefits—more jobs, lower costs and reduced carbon dioxide emissions—but some people still seem to think of renewables as the realm of only the lentil-eating, kaftan-wearing, open-toed sandal brigade. I am sure that the odd lentil still gets eaten, but the open-toed sandal and kaftan wearers—if they were ever there—are long gone and have been replaced by sharp-suited, dynamic and visionary entrepreneurs. The sustainable energy industry's time has come. An agency would help to turn tremendous potential into reality.

Question put and agreed to.

Bill ordered to be brought in by Mr. Gareth R. Thomas, Mr. Paul Clark, Mr. Tony Colman, Mr. Frank Cook, Mr. Cynog Dafis, Mr. Clive Efford, Mr. Jim Fitzpatrick, Mr. Andrew Reed, Angela Smith, Mr. Andrew Stunell, Mr. Stephen Twigg and Dr. Alan Whitehead.

SUSTAINABLE ENERGY AGENCY

Mr. Gareth R. Thomas accordingly presented a Bill to establish a sustainable energy agency to promote renewable energy generation and encourage energy efficiency; and for related purposes: And the same was read the First time; and ordered to be read a Second time on Friday 23 July, and to be printed [Bill 112].

Line of Route

5.4 pm

Mrs. Marion Roe (Chairman of the Administration Committee): I beg to move,

That this House approves the First Report from the Administration Committee on the Proposal to Re-open the Line of Route during the Summer Adjournment (HC 394).

I am pleased to move the motion to approve the report, which represents slightly more than a year's work by the Administration Committee. I should like to thank my colleagues on the Committee—I am tempted to call them my hon. Friends, as we very much work as a team—for the assiduous way in which they have tackled the subject, and for the spirit of co-operation that has prevailed throughout.

I also pay tribute to Lord Boston of Faversham and his colleagues on the Administration and Works Sub-Committee in another place, with whom we held a most useful and constructive concurrent meeting. Finally, I should like to express my Committee's thanks to the Serj ant at Arms and Black Rod and to their respective staffs, to the other House officials—in particular, the Director of Finance and Administration, who unfailingly and efficiently assisted the Committee—and to the consultants who provided specialist advice.

I shall be brief, as I am sure that many hon. Members will wish to make a contribution, but I very much welcome this debate, as it gives the Committee the opportunity to explain its proposals for reopening the Line of Route, and to clear up certain misconceptions, especially about charging and access. Even after the publication of our report, some hon. Members seem to be under the impression that we are proposing that our constituents should have to pay to come and see the House at work. Let me emphasise that we are not, nor have we any plans to do so in the future, contrary to what seems to be implied in the amendment tabled by the hon. Member for North Cornwall (Mr. Tyler) and others. I shall address that point more fully later in my speech.

I think that all hon. Members will appreciate the reasons why, for the past 20 years, the only way a visitor could tour the Palace of Westminster was as a guest of a Member of either House or of a member of staff. The Committee considered that the time was now right for the two Houses to reopen the Line of Route to the general public. However, we agreed to the proposal in principle only after we had been convinced that it would not interfere with the ability of Parliament or its authorities to carry out their duties.

The consultants had to take into account some basic but crucial principles. The Palace of Westminster is, first and foremost, the seat of Parliament and a place of work for around 12,000 passholders, if we include contractors, civil servants and the media. Any increase in visitor activity must respect the Palace's primary function and be capable of responding to changes in route at very short notice. That would mean, of course, that, in the event of a recall during the summer, tours might have to be suspended.

The Palace of Westminster is a grade I listed building and a world heritage site. It is of special architectural interest and any proposals, whether permanent or temporary, that would alter the fabric of the buildings or in any way have an impact on the integrity of the site

would be subject to prior consultation with, for example, English Heritage, the Royal Fine Art Commission and Westminster city council.

The intensity of use of the buildings, especially when Parliament is sitting, means that all major planned works programmes must be concentrated in the long summer recess: a programme typically involving expenditure of some £12 million to £15 million and involving 600 to 2,000 contractors at any one time over an eight to 10-week period and forming part of a 10-year rolling programme.

In addition, whatever arrangements were proposed to bring about greater openness in connection with public access to the Palace of Westminster, it was essential to safeguard the rights of hon. Members and Members of another place to sponsor visits by constituents and others, and for the parliamentary education unit to continue to provide the schools autumn visits programme. Such arrangements currently give rise to some 120,000 visits a year.

The Chairman of the Select Committee on Information, the hon. Member for Sheffield, Hallam (Mr. Allan), quite properly raised concerns about the autumn visits programme. I hope that our report has reassured him that the autumn visits programme will be unaffected by our proposals.

My Committee was convinced that the criteria to which I referred could be met, and we agreed to the principle of a reopening. Our next step was to consider how people should undertake the tour. We eventually decided that the most appropriate way would be to have groups equipped with individual audio guides, with a commentary available in six languages, organised in conjunction with a system of timed ticketing.

Visitors would assemble in Victoria Tower gardens in groups of 20. To avoid peaks and troughs, groups would be admitted by a timed admission or timed ticket arrangement. The day would be divided into a series of admission slots, perhaps of 15-minute intervals. If the number admitted in each slot were limited, visitors could be spread evenly throughout the day. That system of pulsing visitors along the route would flatten demand to a manageable level, and would be of benefit to the Palace and to visitors.

The tour would take the traditional route through both Houses, and would enable visitors to see some of the most impressive and best known parts of the Palace. It is a shame that visitors would not be able to see the Chapel of St. Mary Undercroft—the Crypt—but it is quite small and completely unsuitable for disabled visitors, as is the Great Clock Tower.

I remind the House that the Disability Discrimination Act 1995 requires all places of interest or historic buildings to make effective provision for disabled visitors, which includes provision for the aurally and visually impaired as well as the mobility-impaired. Given the historic nature of the Palace of Westminster, many areas are inaccessible and cannot be modified. Listing regulations take precedence over the 1995 Act, but every reasonable effort must be made to conform to the Act. Consequently, any systems set up for the summer opening programme would have to make reasonable provision for disabled visitors. All interpretation must have equivalents available for disabled visitors, and access to the building must be as unobstructed as possible.

The House may also wish to note that appropriate arrangements would be made to enable people in wheelchairs to have access to the Palace, and that alternatives to the audio guides would be available for visually or hearing-impaired visitors.

Sir Peter Emery (East Devon): I have listened to my hon. Friend with great interest. She refers only to the summer recess. What did the Committee decide about the opening of the House at other times? Now that we work in the morning two days a week, the ability to visit the House is considerably limited. Has thought been given to the use of weekends and recesses other than the summer recess, because I believe that the House should be open for visitors at those times if we are to take the line that her Committee suggests?

Mrs. Roe: I draw my right hon. Friend's attention to paragraph 9 of the Select Committee report, which states:

"The Committee considers that the Summer opening programme should become an annual event, and that, if it were successful, it might be appropriate, in due course, to extend opening to Easter, Whitsun and certain other weekends."

This matter must be assessed carefully, and the impact of the opening during the summer Adjournment would not be the same as at other times. We must ensure that the business of the House is not disrupted in any way. We have already thought about that, and no doubt the Committee will examine that when we have had an opportunity to assess the impact of the opening during the summer Adjournment.

Sir Peter Emery: May I extend my question? The movement towards the summer opening is a major programme during an extended period. Would it not make greater sense to experiment during some of the shorter recess periods to see how we cope with that—using existing staff or extra staff and security—before we proceed with this scheme? Although I admire the proposed scheme, I wonder whether it would be better to have some guidance before we jump into the bigger opening programme.

Mrs. Roe: I point out to my right hon. Friend that it was in the mind of the Administration Committee to initiate a scheme that would cause the least amount of disruption to Members of the House and the other place and to staff. It was felt that the summer Adjournment was the best time for us to assess the general public's response and to allow the scheme to settle before any consideration was given to opening during shorter periods. I remind my right hon. Friend that these facilities are expensive. The Committee wanted to do this properly to maintain the dignity of the Palace of Westminster. We felt that it was necessary to allow the scheme to run for eight weeks during the summer Adjournment so that we could assess the public's response and the way in which the system was operated.

Dr. Nick Palmer (Broxtowe): Does the hon. Lady agree that the concept of a mini-scheme would be difficult to implement, because in our attempts to achieve an adequate scheme that would satisfy visitors, we have

[Dr. Nick Palmer]

sketched out proposals the bulk of which would incur the same expenditure whether we were providing for a long or a short break?

Mrs. Roe: I thank the hon. Gentleman for that intervention. As a member of the Committee, he knows the detail in which we considered this matter. We felt that this proposal was the best option.

The Committee has also made two recommendations which, strictly speaking, are matters for the Commission and the Board of Management. However, because we wanted to ensure that a visit to Parliament would be as memorable as possible, we decided to put down a marker. We considered that the best way to ensure that the Line of Route tours operate as efficiently as possible would be to have a small team of staff whose sole responsibility would be to ensure the tours' success, and to co-ordinate tours with exhibitions and other events planned for Westminster Hall.

Westminster Hall is a 900-year-old architectural gem, and I know that many hon. Members from both sides of the House believe that more use should be made of it for appropriate events. We think that staff should be on hand to assist with visitors' inquiries. Those staff would need to be fully conversant with the Palace's history and procedures. At the risk of embarrassing one particular hon. Friend, I should point out that visitors should not be told that Westminster Hall was the site of the trial of King Charles II.

I now turn to the most misunderstood aspect of our proposals: charging. As we say in the report, a reopening would be a costly project. The latest figures suggest that it would cost £500,000 for the financial year 2000-01 and £350,000 a year thereafter. Those figures represent the Commons' share of the costs only. The total costs would be over £830,000 and almost £600,000 respectively. We did not think it reasonable for costs of that scale to be borne by the taxpayer through the Vote. We therefore concluded, very reluctantly, that the costs should be borne by those who choose to visit during the summer recess.

Mr. Eric Forth (Bromley and Chislehurst): As my hon. Friend says, the amount is substantial, but it is less than the House decided a couple of nights ago to spend on an extremely silly and superfluous new Chamber. My hon. Friend was content with that; now she is telling us that the hapless tourist will have to bear huge sums.

The President of the Council and Leader of the House of Commons (Mrs. Margaret Beckett) *rose—*

Mrs. Roe: The Leader of the House may be able to answer my right hon. Friend more fully than I can.

Mrs. Beckett: I would hate the hon. Lady to be misled by her right hon. Friend. What the House voted for the other evening was a proposal to bring forward expenditure to which the House was already committed.

Mrs. Roe: I thank the right hon. Lady. Let me add that we on the Administration Committee take our duties very seriously. We are always considering ways of obtaining the best value for money, and, when making decisions, we always have one eye on the taxpayer's pocket.

Mr. Peter L. Pike (Burnley): When we travel around the world, we see—especially in Commonwealth countries—war memorials to thousands of people who gave their lives for this country, and to keep this Parliament free. That is one of the reasons why I have grave doubts about charging some of those who visit this great symbol of democracy. I do not know whether the Committee devoted any thought to that.

Mrs. Roe: I hear what the hon. Gentleman says. As I said earlier, it was with reluctance that the Committee reached its conclusions. We did not make our decision frivolously; we went into the matter in great detail. We also made it clear that the present arrangements for constituents to visit the Palace of Westminster would not be affected. This is an additional facility, allowing those with no access to a Member of Parliament to take advantage of the same arrangements. Nothing is being taken away from the present arrangements, which, of course, many Members use every day.

It is estimated that nearly 150,000 people will take part in the tours. As we note in our report, the experience of Westminster Abbey suggests that as many as 80 per cent. of visitors could be from overseas. However, a more strenuous effort should be made to reduce the operational costs outlined in the report. For example, capital costs of some £400,000 for a ticket office, the cost of renting audio equipment and the cost of extra security caused us concern. The consultants, in consultation with the relevant authorities, have been looking for savings and value for money.

The assumptions made by the consultants in their report were in general fairly conservative. Both the costs and the predictions of visitor numbers appeared to the Committee to be reasonable. However, the Committee appreciates that further work is needed. The Finance Office, in consultation with other appropriate authorities in both Houses, will need to develop the financial management arrangements.

The consultants' proposals involve letting some major contracts—for example, for advance booking and ticketing, and for the audio guides. One of the proposals, for merchandising, will be of concern to the hon. Member for Wolverhampton, South–East (Mr. Turner). He and his colleagues on the Catering Committee must, of course, be asked for their views on the sale of souvenirs during the summer opening. However, I do not think that that should delay the House's approval of our proposals.

We have not recommended specific admission prices, but in paragraph 23 of our report, we gave an estimate of the charges that would be needed to enable us to recover our costs within five years. Adults would be charged £6.50, senior citizens, students and holders of ES40s £4, and children £2. Savings already identified suggest that we may be able to reduce the price of an adult ticket to £5.50, with equivalent reductions for other categories of ticket.

Hon. Members may ask why United Kingdom citizens cannot be allowed free access. The short answer is this: how could someone prove that he or she was a UK resident? A UK passport is no proof of residence—and,

in any event, such a basis for free admission would discriminate against foreign nationals legally settled here. I, for one, would not advocate a national identity card to solve this conundrum.

The Committee has agreed that, during August and September 2000, visitors on the Line of Route tours will also have access—at no extra charge—to a millennium exhibition that is planned for Westminster Hall.

Even given the establishment of the Scottish Parliament and Assemblies in Wales and Northern Ireland, the Palace of Westminster is sui generis: it is unique. We therefore cannot benchmark these admission charges against charges anywhere else in the United Kingdom. I remind hon. Members, however, that Buckingham Palace has an admission charge of £9.50, with no concessionary rates, and Westminster Abbey charges £5. Although there are concessionary tickets for admission to the abbey, a further £2 is levied for the use of hand-held audio-guide wands.

The Palace of Westminster would not be unique in charging for admission. The Dutch second Chamber, the Tweede-Kamer, charges 6 guilders, or nearly £2. In Australia's Parliament house, tours involving languages other than English must be pre-booked, and a charge is applied to tour operators and external organisations wishing to use the service. Although no charge is made for entry to the building or participation in public tours, a charge of 5 Australian dollars per person—again, nearly £2—applies to groups requesting a guide exclusively for them. Revenue from the tours offsets additional labour costs.

I cannot stress too strongly that we are proposing admission charges only during the summer Adjournment. We are seeking to recover incremental costs, not to make a profit. In paragraph 20 of our report, we say:

"For over 42 weeks of the year therefore, visitors would still be able to participate in tours of the Palace of Westminster, meet their constituency MP or Members of the House of Lords, listen to debates in both Chambers when either or both Houses are sitting, and attend meetings of Standing and Select Committees free of charge. Even during the Summer Adjournment, Members of both Houses would continue to be able to bring in their guests. It is not, nor has it ever been, proposed that members of the public should be charged to see the Houses of Parliament 'at work'."

Let me now clarify the issue of access for hon. Members during August and September. No change will be made to the current arrangements. Therefore, on Wednesdays and Thursdays in August, and on Tuesdays, Wednesdays and Thursdays in September, hon. Members and Officers of the House will still be able personally to escort, or to pay a Doorkeeper to escort on their behalf, groups of up to 16 around the Line of Route, without their guests having to pay over and above what is now an accepted "fee". Similarly, permanent staff will continue to be able personally to escort groups of up to four guests.

Our proposals seek to improve access to the Palace, not to hinder it. Although it would be a matter of regret, should the House be unable to accept my Committee's proposals, the net result might be that the Line of Route was not reopened at all during the summer.

I realise that it might strike hon. Members as strange that a Chairman of a domestic Committee should be arguing against spending public money. After all, are we not the Committees that are spending millions of pounds on Portcullis House, the kitchens and the parliamentary data and video network? Yes and no. None of those important matters is the responsibility of the Administration Committee. Rather, we on the Committee have always sought to reduce House expenditure by seeking best value for money and by encouraging better housekeeping.

Over the past few years, we have initiated, or endorsed, savings on, for example, stationery and car parking amounting to more than £350,000, sometimes in the face of opposition from some hon. Members. It is not therefore new territory for us to be looking after taxpayers' interests.

As I have said, by charging we seek to recover our initial start-up and running costs within five years. However, even after five years, there will still be running costs, and it will therefore be for the present Administration Committee's successor to decide how to meet those costs. I can, of course, assure the House that my Committee will keep an eye on that matter for the remainder of the current Parliament, and will ask the relevant House authorities for regular progress reports.

I realise that some hon. Members may not be able to support our proposals, in particular with respect to charging, but I should like to say that the report was agreed unanimously by the Committee and only after much deliberation and heart searching. I therefore commend it to the House.

5.32 pm

Mr. Peter L. Pike (Burnley): I am glad to have the opportunity to say a few words in the debate.

I welcome the way in which the Chairman has put the Committee's report to the House and welcome the work that has been done. We should try to enable more people to come into the building and to see Parliament during the summer recess and, indeed, at other times.

When I was a young school boy, I was able, in the days before security had to be so tight, to get on a tram at Wimbledon town hall, come to Westminster, get off at the bridge and walk in here virtually at any time, although in the early years after the war this end of the building was virtually a building site—the Chamber was being rebuilt. Schoolchildren in the London area at that time—when it was much easier and people did not have to worry about the type of thing that might happen to children—looked for places to go. I could go to the Tower of London for free on a Thursday morning. That is no longer possible. All such possibilities have gradually been lost over the years.

It is the question of charging that concerns me. I recognise that Parliament is a working place; we must remember that, but it is an historic building, a great piece of architecture by Barry and Pugin, and we want people to see it. Westminster Hall is celebrating its 900th year; people in this country should be able to see the building. I accept that the proposal will not in any way erode the rights that we have while the House is sitting, or the rights that we have as Members in the months of August and September. The hon. Member for Broxbourne (Mrs. Roe) made that clear, although there was a slight threat that, if we did not agree to the change, we might lose the rights that we already have in August and September. I do not know whether that was intended, but, near the end of the

[Mr. Peter L. Pike]

speech, it sounded as if she was saying that, if we did not agree to the change, we would not retain what we have now—that would go as well.

Mrs. Roe: No. The situation will stay as it is. I was talking about the additional facility.

Mr. Pike: I thank the hon. Lady for that. If she reads *Hansard*, she will find that her comments could have been read in that way. Her intervention makes it absolutely clear. I am glad that a pistol is not being held to our heads with the threat "Approve the change or you will lose the rights you have in August and September."

It is the question of charging that worries me. I accept and understand why it is being introduced, but one could argue that, if people pay their taxes—about 20 per cent. of tourists during August and September are British—they have a right to come here and to see the building.

I made a serious point in my intervention. I have been to countries such as New Zealand and Canada and seen the war memorials, particularly for the first world war. I ask myself: why did those hundreds of people lose their lives fighting for this country? The first world war in particular was a European war, but people from South Africa, Canada, Australia, India and all over fought to secure victory and to ensure that we maintained our freedom at that time; they did so in the second world war, too. Anyone who goes to France and sees the war graves of the 17,000 who died on this day and the 11,000 who died on that day from the Canadian and Australian forces will be reminded of the sacrifices that those people made.

The important point is that, during the second world war, which I am just old enough to remember, this building, Parliament, the Clock Tower and Big Ben—many people call the Clock Tower Big Ben, but we know that it is the bell—were a symbol of the fight against fascism and the fight for freedom. Parliament and this building represent that. They are a great symbol.

We are not a great nation in a military sense any more, but we sometimes underestimate the regard that many parts of the world have for our traditions. Therefore, many of our traditions are bound within this building and our history over the years that we have sat here. The effect of charging on that worries me.

I welcome the move to enable more people to see the building, but it is the question of charging about which I have grave reservations, partly on behalf of the 20 per cent. of people who are British tourists, and partly on behalf of those people in other parts of the world who may want to visit it. We want them to get to see this place and to recognise what it still stands for in the world.

Hon. Members have their difference of view. The right hon. Member for Bromley and Chislehurst (Mr. Forth) and I have disagreed on many occasions on different things, but we agree about what the House stands for. It stands for democracy more than any other place in the world. It has a role to play. I hope that we find some way in which to enable people to see it for free. There may be a cost to pay for that but, in relative terms, it is minimal. We should be prepared to accept that.

I do not want to delay the House any longer, but those are important issues. That is why, when the amendment is, I hope, divided on, I will support it. A little more thought is needed on why we need to charge people to come into the Parliament of the United Kingdom, which is such a great and important symbol throughout the world.

5.39 pm

The President of the Council and Leader of the House of Commons (Mrs. Margaret Beckett): Like all the issues that we are debating today, the decision on the Line of Route is a House of Commons matter. There is no Government view as such. There is no party Whip. There may be—indeed, there are likely to be—wide diversions of view within, as well as across, the political parties. It is an issue of genuine difficulty and delicacy. No hon. Member would wish to see our constituents denied access to the House—that would be entirely contrary to our parliamentary tradition—but, equally, many may have reservations about whether British taxpayers would wish us to use their money to subsidise access to tourists, primarily from overseas, who may very well be charged for that access by tour operators and organisers outside this place who arrange such visits.

In moving the motion on the Administration Committee's report, the hon. Member for Broxbourne (Mrs. Roe) was admirably clear about what it is that the House is being asked to decide. She made the point—it is worth reinforcing—that we should be adding to opportunities to visit this historic building. The House is not automatically open to visitors in the summer recess, or indeed in any recess. Therefore, by passing the motion, we should be creating new opportunities to visit.

I take and understand the sensitivity of the point made by my hon. Friend the Member for Burnley (Mr. Pike). However, with great respect, I tell him that the hon. Member for Broxbourne answered his point in her speech, by drawing attention to the fact that the type of visitors to whom he referred—those who, earlier in their lives, might have fought for this place—do not now have the opportunity of visiting the House should they come here as visitors in the summer recess. Although he asked her and her Committee to give the matter further consideration, they have been considering it for a year.

I should also like to highlight the fact that, if we are to provide adequate facilities—such as audio guides in a variety of languages—expenditure of about £500,000 will be required. Studies have suggested and confirmed that, in summer, 80 per cent. of visitors to Westminster are tourists from overseas. The Administration Committee did not feel able to recommend—I understand its view—that taxpayers should be asked to meet such costs.

The Committee has also made it very clear that the proposal to charge for visits, to cover those costs, will in no circumstances affect the rights of hon. Members or staff to arrange or conduct visits for constituents.

This remains very much a matter for the House. In an ideal world, money would grow on trees, and we would be able to admit visitors and provide high-standard facilities for their visits without regard to cost. Sadly, however, we do not live in a world where that is a matter of indifference. We either reluctantly—I think that it would be reluctantly on the part of all hon. Members—decide to levy charges in those specific circumstances, or decide not to open the House further to interested visitors.

In the millennium year—with the House participating in the special commemorative exhibition, the "String of Pearls"—we have a further opportunity to open our doors.

Despite the anxieties and reservations that have already been expressed in the debate, I believe that we should, on balance, agree to do so.

Therefore, as I said, although there will be a free vote on the motion, and it is not a matter for the Government, I myself shall support the Committee's recommendations.

5.43 pm

Sir Patrick Cormack (South Staffordshire): I entirely agree with the line taken in the debate by the Leader of the House.

I should like to begin, however, by paying a tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for Broxbourne (Mrs. Roe) and to her Committee. The House Committees do a great deal of work for hon. Members. They consist of very few members, but devote an enormous amount of time to their work. Perhaps I should declare an interest, as I have been a member of the Accommodation and Works Committee for many years and know something of the work that goes into the type of report that we are considering today. I also know something of the thoughtful care that goes into them. My hon. Friend and her colleagues on the Committee—an all-party Committee—have come up with very sensible proposals, and I really hope that the House will give them a fair wind today.

As my hon. Friend the Member for Broxbourne reminded us several times in her speech, this is a workplace. It is also, as she again reminded us, one of the great buildings of the world. This is a symbol of democracy; but it is also an architectural gem. It also includes within it Westminster Hall. Probably some hon. Members were in Westminster Hall on Monday, when I was there and Madam Speaker opened that fascinating exhibition on 900 years of the Hall. If colleagues on both sides of the House have not yet seen the exhibition, it will be there for some months, and I urge everyone to go and see it. It is a fascinating and very moving exhibition.

Westminster Hall is the greatest secular building in this country, and has seen more of our history than any other. Perhaps I should add, in passing, that it will see more history on 1 July, when we shall be having a very splendid banquet there. I hope that many hon. Members will come to enjoy the banquet, the first one there since the coronation of George IV, in 1821.

I make those points, with some seriousness, to stress the fact that this is not just a workplace, and that many of those who come here do so primarily not because they are interested in what we do, but because they are interested in what this building represents, and in the fact that it tells the story of this nation's past and the evolution of our democratic system.

Of course it would be quite wrong to charge anyone anything to come and sit in the Strangers Gallery in either the Commons or the Lords. No one is making such a proposal, and I am sure that no one ever would. I assure hon. Members on both sides of the House that, if such a proposition ever were made, I should be the first in the Lobby against it.

We are talking about members of the general public, many of whom will not be British subjects, who want to come in at a time when the House is not in session to admire the architecture and the works of art and to see this place. It is perfectly reasonable that there should be a modest charge for that, to recoup the expenditure that will make the experiment possible.

I should like to make an analogy, which I do not think is too far-fetched. Across the road, in Westminster abbey, a charge is now levied, to which my hon. Friend the Member for Broxbourne referred. If anyone wants to go to a service at the abbey—there are services there every day—of course he or she is not charged; nor should anyone ever be. However, someone who wants to go to the abbey to admire its art and architecture does pay a modest charge. I think that that is entirely reasonable.

All that will happen here, during those summer months of August and September, is that people will pay a modest charge and be able to come and admire the building. I see nothing wrong with that.

There is also a precedent for the change. Only relatively recently, for security reasons, the practice was abandoned whereby members of the public could turn up on a Saturday, meet a guide outside and visit. I well remember that, in my first 10 years in the House, that practice was possible, and I know many people who availed themselves of the opportunity.

Frequently, even those who come now as hon. Members' guests to look round the Palace of Westminster effectively pay a modest charge. All hon. Members have many parties from our constituencies. In an average year, I have an average of one constituency party—very often a quite large one—every fortnight, and very often more than that. Often, to help one another, one's colleagues will sign up his or her constituents for the other 16 places in a group. Nevertheless, there are sometimes bills of £75 or £100 for three or four guides to take people round, and an hon. Member does not always pay that out of his or her own pocket. Those who come pay, and they do so extremely willingly.

Mr. Dale Campbell-Savours (Workington): People do not need a guide.

Sir Patrick Cormack: They do; they must be escorted by either an hon. Member or a guide. One cannot just come and wander round. Members of the public of course have access, through St. Stephen's Hall, to Central Lobby, and that will not change—it never would change. However, members of the public who come to do the Line of Route must be accompanied by either an hon. Member or a member of his or her staff, or by one of the qualified guides. If they are escorted by a qualified guide, a charge is, quite reasonably, levied by the guide.

Mr. Pike: That is not correct. A Member can arrange for a group to go round with a permit in his or her name. If the group do not wish to pay for a guide, they do not need to do so as long as a Member has given them a permit to go round.

Sir Patrick Cormack: If I am slightly wrong, I apologise, but my point is substantially correct. There are very few who would want to do that, because they want the building to be explained to them. I enjoy nothing more than taking parties round. I took one yesterday morning. I love every stone of this building and am very proud of it. I never cease to get a thrill when I walk through Westminster Hall. I never cease to be amazed by the wonderful artistry of Pugin and Barry as I take people round, which I am always happy to do. I like the building so much that I wrote a book about it some years ago,

[Sir Patrick Cormack]

which I commend to hon. Members. It is still in the Library of the House. Perhaps I should declare another interest. I gladly and unashamedly do so.

People need to have the building explained to them if they are to get the maximum benefit from it. The overwhelming majority of those who come are glad to have a guide and very much want one.

Mr. Campbell-Savours: I apologise for not being here for most of the debate. I have had unavoidable meetings. The hon. Gentleman's argument has been based on the fact that people have to pay at the moment. He said that they had to pay a guide to have access. That is on the record. It now turns out that people do not have to pay. The hon. Gentleman is party to a decision to introduce a charge where previously one was not required. That is wrong.

Sir Patrick Cormack: The hon. Gentleman has come in late and has not listened properly to the point. I made the reasonable point that most people who come for a tour of the House are taken round by a guide because Members do not have time to take them. The guides levy a charge, which is frequently passed on—although not always; I sometimes pay it myself. The proposals that we are debating are not without precedent or analogy.

Mr. Campbell-Savours: Choice.

Sir Patrick Cormack: We are talking about choice. The hon. Gentleman can chunter away as much as he likes. He is a great chunterer. I shall not be challenged by anyone on the subject of choice. People do not have the choice to see this building in August or September, but, thanks to the modest, sensible, constructive and thoughtful proposals of the Committee, supported by a number of distinguished Labour Members, they will have that opportunity.

I share the reluctance of the Leader of the House about charging. I wish that we could do it all for free, but we cannot, at least until the initial costs have been recouped. I believe that most of those who come will gladly pay, just as they gladly pay to enjoy Westminster abbey, Buckingham palace and a host of other historic buildings throughout the country. One of the main reasons why people come to this country for their holidays is to enjoy our rich heritage of historical buildings and wonderful museums and galleries, some of which are open free, but the majority of which are not. We would merely put ourselves in that category for two months of the year if we adopted the proposal. I have a basic sympathy with the amendment, but it is far better to have the building open during those two months than to have it closed. It is far better to let people come than to keep them out.

I have three important questions for my hon. Friend the Member for Broxbourne, who will briefly sum up the debate. Does her Committee envisage that those who come will all have hand-held guides, or will there be an opportunity for guides to take people round? Many people prefer a human guide to an inhuman instrument. If so, will there be an opportunity for those staff of the House who act as guides in their off-duty hours to do so during the summer? Some of them have an encyclopaedic knowledge of this place and are wonderful guides because they work here and love the place very much. I hope that they will have that opportunity. Secondly, who will do the commentary for the audio guide, how will it be organised and how many languages will it be in? My third question is merely a point of clarification. My hon. Friend made it clear that the rights of Members and senior officers of the staff would remain. They will be able to come at any time to show people round. She said that that would apply to Members' staff. At the moment it also applies to Members' spouses. Will she confirm that that will remain the case? One or two people have raised that with me.

With those brief questions I am delighted to commend the report. Once again, I thank my hon. Friend and her Committee for putting it together. If the House is pleased to approve the report, as I trust that it will be, this place will be a welcome addition to the tourist map of London.

5.56 pm

Mr. Paul Tyler (North Cornwall): I beg to move, To leave out from "House" to the end of the Question, and to add instead thereof:

"declines to approve the First Report from the Administration Committee (HC394) on the proposal to re-open the Line of Route during the Summer Adjournment until the full implications for entry into the Houses of Parliament at other times of the year, and other options for making these arrangements, are examined and costed."

The amendment is supported by a number of hon. Members on both sides, to whom I am grateful. I agree with the hon. Member for South Staffordshire (Sir P. Cormack) on two points. First, I agree that this building is a very important architectural masterpiece. I admired it when I was involved with architecture and I still do. It is still an amazing working environment, despite the fact that it is unable to move with the times in some respects, as is shown by the problems of making the disabled more welcome. I endorse the views expressed by others that we should make the building available as much as possible for people to see how it works.

I also agree with the compliments that the hon. Gentleman paid to the House Committees, particularly the Administration Committee. The hon. Member for Broxbourne (Mrs. Roe) introduced her report with seductive modesty, but I warn hon. Members to look carefully at the small print.

Before I refer specifically to the report, I must deal with three general points, two of which are widespread misconceptions that have been repeated this afternoon. The first is that, somehow, the proposals in the report deal exclusively with August and September and with foreign tourists. Both those arguments are wrong. There are detailed recommendations in the report that apply to other parts of the year and there are important implications for the entry of all persons to the building.

The second misconception is that we have to get on with this. It has taken a long time to reach the Floor of the House. I asked the previous Leader of the House what was going on in July of last year, because rumours were circulating. However, there is no rush. Some people thought that we had to get on quickly because we were going to open the place this August. Nothing will happen until August 2000—14 months hence—so there is time to get it right.

The third point is that there is widespread concern that this is the thin end of a big wedge. Many hon. Members have expressed concern about that in the House

and outside. If I were at liberty to do so, I should quote extensively from an important letter from the Finance and Services Committee, on which I serve, setting out a number of reservations. However, as the Chairman is not here, it would be unfair. I hoped that the hon. Member for Kirkcaldy (Dr. Moonie) might be present, because the letter expressed important reservations about the report.

The inhabitants of the other end of the building share our concerns, but they keep being told that the Commons has agreed to it, just as we shall no doubt be told that the Lords have agreed. That is not true.

Dr. Palmer: Just to clarify that point, let me say that there were fairly extensive discussions with the equivalent body in the House of Lords and only one member of that body dissented vigorously. The overwhelming majority supported the proposal. Of course, the debate will reveal whether that is the general view.

Mr. Tyler: I understand that the House of Lords has not yet taken a decision, so it has not yet shown where it stands.

I want to deal with the proposals first in relation to the principle; secondly, in relation to some practical issues; and, thirdly in relation to precedent.

First, in paragraph 3, the consultants

"identified the potential to open the Line of Route on non-sitting days at other times of the year."

From the outset, the private consultants whom the Select Committee asked to look at the proposal considered not just August and September, but the whole year. As the hon. Member for Broxbourne said, that is still implicit in the report.

Paragraph 3 also states that

"the majority of operational services"

would be

"contracted out to specialist organisations".

Those of us who are suspicious of contracting out, commercialisation and privatisation should look carefully at the small print of the report.

The proposal that is endorsed by the Committee at paragraph 9 of the report is that:

"the Summer opening programme should become an annual event, and that, if it were successful, it might be appropriate, in due course, to extend opening to Easter, Whitsun and certain other weekends."

Where would it stop? We do not know, and it is not spelt out. When I deal with the economics of the proposal, the House will agree that the likelihood is that, once it has started, it will be unstoppable.

In other words, this is a completely new departure. The Select Committee is saying quite blatantly, first, that it is likely to extend throughout the year in due course; and, secondly, that, whatever safeguards are mentioned now, there is nothing to stop the system being extended to sitting days. The Committee can give us all the assurances that it likes, but there is nothing to stop it. Thirdly, it suggests an element of contracting out or privatisation.

Sir Patrick Cormack: Personally, I would be delighted if the proposals were extended to other recesses and weekends, but, in respect of sitting days, the proposal would have to come before the House again and I cannot think of a single hon. Member who would vote for it.

Mr. Tyler: The hon. Member for South Staffordshire is always telling us about precedent. Once a precedent is established for charging for entry into this building, it will be difficult to stop it.

Mrs. Beckett: Will the hon. Gentleman clarify something? He has made a point about the Committee discussing the extension of the proposal throughout the year. It has certainly discussed opening during other recesses and weekends, as he rightly said, but surely he recognises that that would involve an access that is not now available. An incautious hearer might take the view that he is saying that a charge would be made for access that is now available. Surely that access is not now available. I wholeheartedly endorse the remarks of the hon. Member for South Staffordshire (Sir P. Cormack). It is grossly over-egging the pudding to suggest that the proposal is somehow the thin end of the wedge. I cannot think of any hon. Member who would advocate that we should charge for our constituents to come when the House was in session or who would vote for such a proposal.

Mr. Tyler: I am grateful to the Leader of the House. I shall return to that point in a moment in relation to the economics of the proposal. It is extremely important for hon. Members to recognise that, once we embark on this course, it will become increasingly likely that people will say that the only viable way for it to operate is to extend it as far as possible.

We have already been told that up to a quarter of those who will come here in August and September will be United Kingdom citizens who have already contributed through their taxes to their democracy and are entitled to see where that democracy resides. If the proposal is extended to the Easter and Whitsun recesses, the proportion will rise. We all know that far more of our constituents than tourists are likely to want to come at that time.

I take seriously the point made by the hon. Member for Burnley (Mr. Pike). I remember the wartime years only distantly, but I have many relations who served alongside those who fought on behalf of the Commonwealth countries against the Nazi dictatorship. Those people will feel that they are being treated in a rather shabby way if, at the only time that they can come here, they find that they are charged for entry.

Dr. Palmer: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Tyler: I want to make progress as I know that others want to speak.

I know that some hon. Members object to all charging. I do not necessarily take that view. As the hon. Member for South Staffordshire has pointed out, there are already some charges, so that is not the big issue. The issue is whether the proposed method of charging will be worth losing the vital rights of our constituents and fellow citizens to come here free of charge. At the moment, groups from constituencies that are further afield can visit only during the months when we are not sitting,

[Mr. Tyler]

particularly September. A school group from Cornwall might very well come at Whitsun or in September. If it were possible, I would try to make arrangements for them to be escorted round, but that cannot be guaranteed. Increasing numbers of people will find it difficult to fit in with the proposed arrangements.

There are also some practical considerations. In addition to the outside contractors that the report envisages, paragraph 14 proposes that three new staff should be appointed—two senior and one subsidiary member of staff. What will they do for the other 10 months of the year? Will they be fully employed for only eight weeks? That does not seem very economic.

We are told in paragraph 17 that the two month-scheme will cost in the region of £500,000 in year one and £350,000 in the following year, with the Lords making an additional contribution. Within that very narrow margin, the pressure to extend the period will be enormous. Any private enterprise organisation—or any enterprise within the House—would immediately seek to expand the scheme other recesses and weekends. The Select Committee is obviously aware of that. What business would employ staff and equip itself to run an eight-week year? Of course it would immediately try to extend its working year as far as possible. The level of charging is referred to in the report and the hon. Member for Broxbourne said that some savings have already been made. Perhaps we should debate the matter every week so that the cost would come down to nil, as it is impressive that, since the publication of the report just a few weeks ago, it has already been possible to reduce the charge.

Let us consider the figures in the report. A family of two adults and three children would have to pay £14 to get in. That is a substantial sum for a small family. However, if a group or school party were not lucky enough to get sponsorship, a group of 13 young people and three adults would have to pay £45.50. Under the present arrangements, the maximum would be about £20 and would include a guide.

In addition, the report anticipates some 2,000 people an hour coming through in August and September. The hon. Member for Broxbourne and others have said that there will be no disruption to hon. Members' parties coming round. Hon. Members should imagine their own party arriving behind a queue of 2,000 people. How would they queue barge? How would they get preference? Of course the proposals will affect the entry of our constituents, whether we take them round themselves or ask someone else to do it.

There will have to be experts to answer questions. As has already been said, visitors will be equipped with audio guides of a make that I understand has just been thrown out by Buckingham palace and the Tower of London because they do not work properly. Audio guides cannot answer questions, so there will still have to be people to do that. If, as happens every summer recess, the Line of Route changes owing to building work, the audio guide will be useless unless someone is paid to record a completely new message. In addition, if groups are not accompanied by qualified guides employed by this place, security charges will have to increase. There will have to be people to keep an eye on those groups. When they come with our staff or the staff of the House, they are automatically supervised but, if they are unaccompanied, security staff will have to be doubled or trebled, at considerable cost. They will be there for only August and September, so I do not know what preferential rates are to be paid. Or will they be students taking up a holiday job? I have nothing against students, but their professionalism would be nothing like as great as one would expect.

The hon. Member for South Staffordshire usually lectures us on the issue of precedent, and I hope that he feels that that issue is entirely appropriate. I believe that, once we start on the slippery slope of commercialisation and privatisation, there will be remorseless pressure to extend the period, to increase the categories that are included—eventually, I see our constituents being included—or to increase the charges; or all three. That will be inevitable once we have said yes.

I appreciate that the Committee has done some useful work, but it has not put a choice before the House. It has not put a choice before the Commission, or any other Committee of the House. We are entitled to a choice, and that is what the amendment provides. It does not call for the whole thing to be thrown out, as important work is being done. However, the House is entitled to know what choices there are and whether we can avoid what seems to be the least-good option.

I believe that we should invite an in-house bid. In their spare time, the staff of the House—as the hon. Member for South Staffordshire acknowledged—provide an excellent service. Why should they be done out of an important role that they fulfil admirably? Why should we not see whether they can provide, on a co-operative basis, an alternative method of dealing with the problem?

I believe that we should examine the costs. It is a fact of life, as the museums have just found, that charging itself costs money. One has to employ more people to handle the money, or use machinery, or a complicated combination of the two. The actual cost of charging is not referred to in the report, and it should be. We should keep supervised tours rather than move to an audio guide system. That would save dramatically on security costs.

If it is felt that the setting-up costs are beyond what we are entitled to consider, we should look carefully at some of the other costs being incurred within this building. I understand that Black Rod in the other place is pushing through a scheme that will cost £2.25 million to apply some cosmetic attention to Old Palace Yard. It has no practical advantage for us, or for our constituents. A small fraction of that sum, dedicated to making this House more accessible to everybody—whether they are from this country or abroad—would be a proper use of public funds.

Our constituents, the electorate, have paid through their taxes for the democratic system. I believe that it would be quite wrong for us to make them pay twice just so they can come and see us and our place of work.

6.12 pm

Dr. Nick Palmer (Broxtowe): I have listened attentively to the points made so far, and I declare an interest, in that I am a member of the Committee. I shall not go on at length because the issues are straightforward. In effect, we have three options. The first is the status quo, which is that there is no access, except by pre-planned groups who normally pay for a guide. That means that, if an individual—perhaps one of those

referred to by my hon. Friend the Member for Burnley (Mr. Pike); a relative of someone who fought for Britain—seeks to visit the House during the summer recess and cannot contact an hon. Member, he or she will be unable to do so.

The second is to spend £500,000, on our estimate—I assure the hon. Member for North Cornwall (Mr. Tyler) that we looked extensively at alternative costings, and guided groups made up of individual applicants would be more expensive—to provide what would be basically an additional tourist attraction. The third option—the one before us—is that we provide that attraction, but that it should be paid for principally by those who benefit.

As with any proposal for change, there are those, such as the hon. Member for North Cornwall, who propose doing nothing for the time being and awaiting further discussions and developments. They offer the prospect of a better world in which the ideal can be achieved. I have not been in this House for as long as many hon. Members here, but I predict that, if we reject the proposal today, £500,000 will not be found to provide free access for summer visitors, 80 per cent. of whom will be tourists. Politically, it will not happen.

Mr. Campbell-Savours: We have already had five years of revenues referred to by the hon. Member for North Cornwall (Mr. Tyler), who said that more than £2 million was available for one project. Why cannot we have that money?

Dr. Palmer: My hon. Friend will be aware from many similar debates on spending issues that each of us can always identify one project, not under discussion, that might be scrapped to pay for the project under discussion. We are unable to assess the scheme to which the hon. Member for North Cornwall referred. If it is possible to save more than £2 million by not carrying out an unnecessary scheme, we should do so.

However, that is an entirely separate issue. We are debating whether we should budget an additional £500,000 to entertain tourists from around the world who will pay sums vastly in excess of the proposed sums to come here in the first place.

Mr. David Davis (Haltemprice and Howden): We are accountable to our constituents. The arguments that we have heard so far have posed two options—no access, or access with a charge. Our constituents will look at that and pose other options. If we are spending millions over the road—for ourselves, in effect—why cannot we find the money to give them access to this House?

Dr. Palmer: I fully agree that public scepticism about the sums spent on Portcullis House is great and will become yet greater when they become better known. However, while we are not debating Old Palace Yard, we are also not debating Portcullis House. We are debating whether we should spend £500,000 to benefit the tourist industry.

The hon. Member for North Cornwall said that we should not be charging our constituents twice—once through taxes, to elect us and to pay our salaries, and once to visit this place. If we were to spend £500,000 on making the scheme free, that is precisely what we should be doing. We shall be charging our constituents to save money for the 80 per cent. of non-constituents who use this facility in the summer.

I would share the concerns of the House if it were suggested that this charge might be made compulsory for our constituents. However, the Committee was careful to stress that there should be no change to the present facility that any hon. Member can take his or her constituents around at no cost and at a time convenient to him or her, whether in the summer recess or at any other time.

We are speaking here exclusively of an additional facility to benefit people such as those referred to by my hon. Friend the Member for Burnley, who are not able to visit in an organised group and who wish to visit the mother of Parliaments. If we focus on what the proposal says, there is little that should be controversial. If we focus, as did the hon. Member for North Cornwall, on supposed follow-ons and extensions that might happen in the future, it is possible to conjure up all sorts of alarming potentials. The Committee focused on a proposal for the summer months and said that, if it is a success—only the House as a whole will be able to assess that—we can review whether we should extend the scheme to other non-sitting periods.

I invite the hon. Member for Broxbourne (Mrs. Roe) to confirm that it is also her view that, before proceeding to any such extension, the House should have the opportunity to discuss it again.

Mrs. Roe: I am certain that the Administration Committee, no matter who is a member of it at the time, would want to have the endorsement of the House for any changes to the programme.

Dr. Palmer: I am grateful to the hon. Lady for that clarification.

Mr. Tyler: Does the hon. Gentleman recognise that the report that we are being asked to approve includes specific reference to extending opening to

"Easter, Whitsun and certain other weekends",

and that, once a considerable sum has been spent on the proposal, the pressure to extend it will be remorseless?

Dr. Palmer: I have heard the hon. Gentleman very clearly, but we must be precise. Paragraph 9 says:

"The Committee considers that the Summer opening programme should become an annual event, and that, if it were successful, it might be appropriate, in due course, to extend opening"

to other periods. I have rarely seen more subjunctives in one sentence. I credit the hon. Gentleman and all other hon. Members with the backbone to resist any suggestion that, because we have approved a summer experiment, we have approved all the extensions that he fears.

Those who debate the matter in future can look back at this debate and confirm that we have said in the clearest possible terms that we are talking only about the summer. There are three clear options: do nothing; hope for an illusion; or opt for a scheme that provides a new facility for individual visitors, mostly from overseas.

6.22 pm

Mr. Eric Forth (Bromley and Chislehurst): I completely agree with the amendment so ably and eloquently moved by the hon. Member for North

[Mr. Eric Forth]

Cornwall (Mr. Tyler). I agree with only one aspect of what the report says: that access to the Palace should be maximised for everybody, be they from this country or from abroad.

We have witnessed a rather astonishing outbreak of xenophobia: suddenly, foreigners are undesirables and we either do not want them here or want to charge them. I want to dissociate myself from that view. It is pretty disgraceful stuff. I would like all people—both our voters and taxpayers and, even more, people from abroad—to be welcome in the Palace, in the right circumstances, so that they may see and enjoy that of which we are so proud. That should surely be our main motivation.

Dr. Palmer: When the right hon. Gentleman says "even more", is he saying that we should subsidise foreign visitors at the expense of our constituents?

Mr. Forth: I would not use the word "subsidise" but I would welcome anyone here, be they from this country or from abroad. I go to the United States as often as I can and visit state capital buildings—so far I have visited about 30 and I look forward to visiting many more—and I am not charged there or on Capitol hill in the District of Columbia, because the Americans are proud of their democratic process and proud to welcome visitors, including even me. I am made to feel welcome. They want me to share in the pride that they have in their democratic history and institutions, state by state and at federal level in DC.

Mr. Pike: Should we not remember that foreign tourists spend money here? They support the economy and pay VAT and other taxes while they are here.

Mr. Forth: The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right. We often say in the House how much we want to encourage the tourist trade. If we can offer this place as an additional attraction to tourists, that in itself will do much to encourage that trade, which already generates so much revenue and so many jobs. I have absolutely no problem with welcoming visitors here, be they native taxpayers and voters or visitors from abroad. They should all be treated equally.

Hon. Members have rightly taken an interest in how we defray the costs. My right hon. Friend the Member for Penrith and The Border (Mr. Maclean) suggested to me earlier today that a much more imaginative and systematic merchandising effort would go a long way towards that. Given the amount of revenue generated in the relatively small retail space currently available in the kiosks, I believe that he is right. We could also offer optional facilities or guided tours at a charge. The Committee has not explored all those avenues as it should.

The point has been made over and over again that taxpayers and voters can always come here courtesy of their Member of Parliament, but the irony is that, if we open up this place during the summer recess, that is the very time when most Members of Parliament are at their least accessible. I put it no more strongly than that and I will not go into any gruesome details, but hon. Members will know exactly what I mean.

We can say, "Don't worry, natives, you'll be able to get in via your MP while all these rotten foreigners are paying," but the occasional voter and taxpayer might have a little difficulty laying hands on a Member of Parliament, especially during the summer recess when hon. Members are busy on fact-finding trips and with similar work.

All in all, I welcome the original intention of the exercise, which was to open up this great building and our traditions to as many people as possible. From that point on, the exercise has gone very badly wrong.

Mr. David Davis: I am a little perplexed by my right hon. Friend's willingness to subsidise an activity. That may be a first. The important point is that there are two decisions, not one. The first is whether we make this place available to the public in the summer. The second, separate decision, is whether we charge. I think that we should make it available, and the costs are all in that decision. After that, any further costs—for letting in foreigners, for example—are near to zero. As he says, better merchandising could meet all the costs of allowing foreign visitors in free. Does he agree that we are making a two-stage decision, the first part of which is to open up our democracy to our own people?

Mr. Forth: My right hon. Friend is right. I am not often heard to advocate the use of taxpayers' money for such purposes and I am usually the first to adopt a market approach. I think that there is a market element in what I am saying. I am trying to strike a balance between maximum access and recouping as much of the cost as possible. It is possible that the scheme could end up generating revenue even beyond the costs that have been identified by the Committee.

I am afraid that, unless I hear something very much more convincing than I have heard so far, my inclination is strongly to support the amendment and to reject the report.

6.30 pm

Mr. Vernon Coaker (Gedling): Like many hon. Members, I agree with much of the report. It is primarily about trying to extend access to this place to people from this country and abroad and, as the right hon. Member for Bromley and Chislehurst (Mr. Forth) said, we all welcome that move. When people visit this building—whether they are constituents, friends or tourists—one can see the way in which they are inspired and the great joy that they derive from it. Why are people so inspired by this building? I suggest that it is because this place represents democracy. This is the mother of Parliaments and it represents all sorts of ideals.

I take issue with the report's suggestion that we should charge people to come to this place and feel that sense of awe—whether during the summer recess or at any other time. That is deeply wrong. In essence, it is a matter of principle.

Mr. Robert Sheldon (Ashton-under-Lyne): The Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport is preparing to ensure that entry to all our museums is free. Yet we are planning to introduce an entrance fee to this great, modern, working museum. We should not charge people to enter this place over the summer. The amounts of money are trivial. The Secretary of State is about to spend millions of pounds removing museum entry fees, while we are about to introduce just such a fee in this place. That is a nonsense.

Mr. Coaker: My right hon. Friend is absolutely correct. Paragraph 19 of the report states:

"it is now Government policy that institutions such as the Tate Gallery, the National Gallery and the British Museum should not charge an entrance fee".

The report points out the contradiction in Government policy, but then goes on to suggest that we should introduce an entrance fee to one of the best museums in the country.

The proposed charges will stop some people visiting the building. Furthermore, I believe that our constituents will react badly to the concept of charging UK citizens or tourists to enter their Parliament. They will be absolutely amazed and bewildered.

Dr. Palmer: Will my hon. Friend not concede that nearly all of his arguments apply equally to Westminster abbey, which is the national centre of our established church where people might wish to worship? People are charged to enter that building.

Mr. Coaker: I might believe that entry to Westminster abbey should be free, but unfortunately I cannot vote on that issue. I have an opportunity to speak in this Chamber about whether we should charge people to visit this place, and an opportunity to vote on this amendment. I intend to seize that opportunity. I believe that the charging proposal is deeply flawed, and I shall support the amendment moved by the hon. Member for North Cornwall (Mr. Tyler).

We either charge people to enter this place or are proud that entry is free. I think we should be proud that entry to our Parliament—the symbol of our democracy—is free, in August, December, March or whenever. Any costs of extending access to this place should be met from the general tax fund. We want to extend access to people and, in so doing, ensure that people are not put off by the cost. We must remain proud of the fact that entry to our Parliament is free.

6.35 pm

Mr. John Randall (Uxbridge): I pay tribute to the hard work of my hon. Friend the Member for Broxbourne (Mrs. Roe) on the Committee. All Committees should strive to produce such a succinct report after taking evidence for a year.

I represent a constituency that is situated very close to London—in fact, it is regarded as part of London these days—but that does not mean that my constituents have easy access to this place. Like all hon. Members who have spoken in this debate, I welcome the fact that people will have greater access to Parliament during the summer recess. However, I am fundamentally opposed to charging for that access.

I came to the debate with the idea that only United Kingdom citizens should be allowed free entry to Parliament. However, hon. Members on both sides of the Chamber have argued powerfully that free entry should be extended not only to Commonwealth citizens but to tourists, who already pay tax in this country and contribute to the wealth of our economy. Therefore, I have decided not to be xenophobic about this matter.

Mr. David Davis: On this occasion.

Mr. Randall: On this occasion.

I speak today particularly on behalf of families. The school holidays are the only time when many people have an opportunity to travel to London and visit this place. It has been said, slightly glibly, that the entrance charge for a family is not excessive. However, if we add together all the charges at London tourist attractions, the resulting cost is very high. I believe that children should visit this place as part of their education. Charging will dissuade parents from bringing their children to Parliament because they will think that £14 per family is just too expensive.

Hon. Members on both sides of the House have argued in support of the amendment, and I should perhaps declare an interest in the debate. I am a retailer, and I believe that we should consider increasing parliamentary retail revenues. I sometimes visit the shop around Christmas. I listen to the ringing of the till and think wistfully of my previous incarnation as a retailer. I think that more could be made of those revenues, which could be improved and used to subsidise entrance fees. I believe hon. Members should support the amendment and consider generating other forms of revenue. We must not rush into charging an entry fee.

6.38 pm

Mr. Dale Campbell-Savours (Workington): I have been a Member of Parliament for about 20 years. I used to sit three rows behind the Opposition Front Bench and, in my first years in this place, behind me there sat a very wise Member of Parliament named Willie Hamilton—I am sure hon. Members remember him with great affection. I was a young, thrusting Member of Parliament who was trying to do his bit to bring down the Government, and Willie used to offer me some sound advice.

On one occasion, I had some new-fangled idea about modernising Parliament: I thought that sittings should commence at 10 am and adjourn at 6 pm because that was the way in which a civilised Parliament should be run. I remember Willie leaning over, tapping me on the shoulder and saying, "You'll learn, laddie. You cannot change things in this place that have been traditions for decades. If you make changes without full consideration, things will go wrong." This proposal is nonsense, and everyone who has been in the House for a long time knows it.

I asked my hon. Friend the Member for Broxtowe (Dr. Palmer) who was on the Committee. I have been here for 20 years and my right hon. Friend the Member for Ashton-under-Lyne (Mr. Sheldon), who intervened on me and who has said that the proposal is nonsense, has been here for 40 years. When I considered the Committee's membership, it seemed to me that several new Members, who have in the past couple of years been elected to the Committee by majority—obviously supported by others, I concede—have taken a view on these matters without recognising the implications of the proposals that they are supporting. They are simply wrong.

The hon. Member for South Staffordshire (Sir P. Cormack) is one of the friendly Members whom we all adore, and I am astonished that he should support

[Mr. Dale Campbell-Savours]

this proposition. He did not seem to argue from a position of neutrality; he seemed to believe in the proposal. I find it astonishing that he should take that position.

Dr. Palmer: I am having difficulty in following my hon. Friend's argument. He seems to be saying simultaneously that those new hon. Members who support the proposal are unwise and have not had the benefit of experience, but that support for the proposal from those hon. Members who have been here for a while is merely astonishing.

Mr. Campbell-Savours: It is. That is precisely the point. The hon. Member for South Staffordshire is a wise, older Member, and I am astonished that he should take the position that he has.

I want to take action in the Chamber tonight because I know that, despite what the public think, there are Members sitting in their offices all over Westminster watching our debate. The public seem to think that when the Chamber is empty, no one knows what is happening in the House of Commons, but of course many, perhaps hundreds, of MPs are watching this debate tonight. I say to them, "Please come out of your offices because unless you come and vote against this nonsense, the House will make a ridiculous decision that will make us all look rather silly."

When the public consider these matters, they will ask how it is possible—if this is true, and I am told that it is and I have not heard it contested—for Members of Parliament to spend £250 million on an office block for themselves and then start charging the public to come in and see the relics, exhibits and pictures in this place. That is utterly ludicrous.

We talk about charges, but I do not think that Members realise what the charges will be. The charge will be £5.50 for an adult.

Mr. Coaker: It will be £6.50.

Mr. Campbell-Savours: I was wrong. It will cost an adult £6.50 to come into Parliament during the summer recess. That is an absolute outrage. We must vote that proposal down tonight. I am told that if my constituents' children cannot get a ticket from me and come to London in a group, they may well have to spend £2 each to get into the House of Commons. That is just plain wrong. I say to my hon. Friends that they should make sure that the Lobbies are tonight full of people who understand the issues and are prepared to reject the whole proposition.

We heard that audio systems will be made available for people to wear so that they will know what is going on in the House. I have been told that those systems were used in Buckingham palace, but they had to be withdrawn because they do not always work. One must be standing in the right position, away from the column or on the correct side of the window. One must stand in a place where the signal can be picked up. People said, "We don't want anything to do with that nonsense. We want the old system of guides or the right simply to walk around, instead of all that high-tech paraphernalia that doesn't work."

This proposal is a foot in the door, and whatever hon. Members say, once we establish the principle of charging in this place, we shall extend it. Let there be no doubt about that. The intention now may not be to extend charging. It never is, but once we begin to charge, the pressure will build up. We shall ask ourselves, "Why don't we build a new exhibit next year, and put the charges up? We'll introduce a new charge for constituents, perhaps of £1, to pay for the new exhibit." Such ideas will start in a little Committee somewhere. Its members will find a justification, such as a need or a new requirement that must be funded, and then impose a new charge.

My final argument relates to the whole question of what we are doing in the House. I do not want to be party to a decision that creates any impediment to the right of people to come here and see what is here. This is the mother of Parliaments; it is the institution that is talked about with respect all over the world, so do we want to get into the squalid business of trade? We cannot associate Parliament with the squalid principles of trade; we must reject all that. I say to hon. Members, "Get out of your offices, get into the Lobbies, and let's have some common sense."

6.45 pm

Mrs. Roe: We have had a useful debate this afternoon, and it is clear that there is still much work to be done. I know that the relevant authorities will have taken note of what hon. Members have said and will address the concerns that they have expressed.

First, I shall deal with the points made by the hon. Member for North Cornwall (Mr. Tyler) when he spoke to his amendment. I note that he would prefer to delay a reopening pending further examination of the implications and the options. Although I have every sympathy with his desire to get things right, I remind him that the Committee has been considering the matter for 14 months, and the House authorities still have another 14 months in which to finalise all the arrangements.

Mr. Sheldon: There is a strong case for delay because the matter has not, I think, even been raised with the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport, who is planning to make all museums free. Surely the first thing that the Committee should have done was to ask the Secretary of State for his views on this matter. It would be astonishing if all the museums in the country were open and this one were closed.

Mrs. Roe: I accept the right hon. Gentleman's point. However, my Committee decided to publish its findings in the form of a Select Committee report, thereby making them public—and although hon. Members have spoken in the debate, we have not yet received much correspondence from them. In fact, we have had only one letter. The Secretary of State had an opportunity to ensure that his views were available to the Committee, and he is, of course, still able to do so.

Following the point made by the hon. Member for North Cornwall, I believe that if we delayed and waited until summer 2001 to reopen the Line of Route, we would be in danger of over-egging the pudding. I hope that he will accept my constructive suggestion that he might find it helpful to arrange a meeting with the Serjeant at Arms and the Director of Finance and Administration so that he can discuss the details of his concerns.

The hon. Gentleman made five main points, about the time of year, the unfairness of charging, the waste of staff time, MPs' problems with groups and the costs of charging. All those points are covered in the report. I am a little short of time, but I emphasise to him that the reopening is an additional facility, which would be operated on an experimental basis and, in the first instance, for summer only.

We have discussed paragraph 9 of the report. As the hon. Member for Broxtowe (Dr. Palmer), who is a member of the Administration Committee, clearly pointed out, the report leaves plenty of room for a proper assessment to be made before we take any further steps. I am sure that the House will make its views known.

Staff will be part of a visitors' office, but they will have many other tasks. They will be required to deal with the millennium exhibition in Westminster Hall, so their duties will not be confined to the Line of Route. Charging will involve some administrative costs, but they will be absorbed in the scheme.

The hon. Member for North Cornwall said that he felt that the proposal was the thin end of the wedge. I hope that he will realise that his fears are unfounded. Of course, the House can come to any decision; any future Administration Committee, with new members, may come to a different decision. I hope that he does not think that something will be slipped through without proper debate, assessment and review.

On the points made about guides, in paragraph 15 of the report, the Committee

"recommends that suitably knowledgeable staff should be available at the end of the tour in order to assist visitors' enquiries."

We hope that those with knowledge and experience of the House will come forward for those duties. Of course, the present guides will still be able to take round parties that have been organised by Members of Parliament, and so on. Their services will still be required.

Some hon. Members, including the hon. Members for Gedling (Mr. Coaker), for Burnley (Mr. Pike) and for Workington (Mr. Campbell-Savours) and my right hon. Friend the Member for Bromley and Chislehurst (Mr. Forth) and my hon. Friend the Member for Uxbridge (Mr. Randall), expressed their total opposition to charging. I understand their concerns, but, on balance, and after much soul searching—this decision was not taken frivolously—the Administration Committee concluded that the cost of reopening the Line of Route would be so great that the fairest way in which to pay for it would be to charge only United Kingdom taxpayers who chose to make use of the facility.

Mr. Campbell-Savours: We have heard that £2.5 million—five years' revenue—is available to subsidise this project. Is the hon. Lady in favour in principle of using that revenue?

Mrs. Roe: It is not my responsibility to decide where that money should be allocated; I am certainly not aware of the reason why it has been allocated. The Administration Committee takes very seriously the duty of obtaining good value for money for its decisions. I assure the hon. Gentleman that I mentioned in my opening speech that some savings have been made. I cannot comment on money that has already been allocated elsewhere.

My hon. Friend the Member for Uxbridge raised a point about school holidays and family visitors. I repeat that the Committee was very reluctant to recommend charging. It is important to remember that, at present, no one can enjoy the facility during the summer. This additional facility will enhance those already provided.

I am most grateful to the right hon. Member for Derby, South (Mrs. Beckett) and my hon. Friend the Member for South Staffordshire (Sir P. Cormack) for their support. I shall quickly run over my hon. Friend's points, on which he requested some information. Audio guides will be provided. We have been informed by the consultants that they will operate effectively and respond to the needs of visitors. Of course, we shall monitor the equipment and ensure that it reflects the requirements placed on it. There will certainly be opportunities for staff who have knowledge of the House to use their expertise in one way or another if they wish to volunteer to do so in the proper way.

My hon. Friend asked how many languages would be available. The answer is English, French, German, Spanish, Italian and Japanese. If we receive desperate requests for others, I have no doubt that we would consider them. He also asked whether spouses would still be able to escort guests. I assure him that that will be so. Again, I reiterate that nothing that is in place now will change. We are debating an additional facility for people who at the moment are not able to enjoy this wonderful treasure and piece of history.

I remind the House of four fundamental points. Our proposals represent an additional facility for visitors, especially those who might be termed "casual visitors"—the person who does not have direct access to a Member of Parliament who can organise a tour. There will be no change to the arrangements whereby hon. Members can organise visits for their constituents during the summer. Our constituents will not be charged to see either or both Houses at work.

Finally, and reluctantly, if the House does not approve our proposals—I know that the hon. Member for Workington would like to ransack another budget to meet the costs—the Line of Route will not reopen during the summer. Without that admission charge, reopening it is not an option. I remind the House that the matter must still go before the House of Lords, which will also go through our report. We do not yet know its conclusions.

Mr. Pike: Surely the hon. Lady is misleading the House because, at the end of the day, it is not for the Administration Committee to say that, without charging, we cannot reopen the Line of Route in August and September. It is for this House and democracy to do so. If we say, "Take the proposal back, have another look at it and come up with another one," the Committee will have to take note of that.

Mrs. Roe: I accept the hon. Gentleman's point. He will recall that I said that, at the end of the day, the House will decide. In no way would I undermine the House's final decision. We have very seriously considered the figures over much time and come to the conclusion—reluctantly—that in order to make reopening feasible, we will have to charge.

I hope that I have covered all the points raised. I again thank hon. Members for their courtesy and their kind comments about the report. The Committee felt that this

[Mrs. Roe]

was the best way to bring the issue into the open so that everyone would be given an opportunity to see exactly what it was proposing and why. Of course, the matter is for the House to decide, but I urge my colleagues to reject the amendment, thus giving those who at the moment do not have access the opportunity to enter this wonderful Palace.

Question put, That the amendment be made:—

The House divided: Ayes 119, Noes 36.

Division No. 199] **[6.57 pm**

AYES

Allan, Richard
Ashdown, Rt Hon Paddy
Ballard, Jackie
Barnes, Harry
Battle, John
Beith, Rt Hon A J
Bennett, Andrew F
Bermingham, Gerald
Brady, Graham
Brake, Tom
Breed, Colin
Bruce, Malcolm *(Gordon)*
Burnett, John
Burns, Simon
Burstow, Paul
Butterfill, John
Campbell–Savours, Dale
Chidgey, David
Clappison, James
Clarke, Charles *(Norwich S)*
Clarke, Rt Hon Kenneth *(Rushcliffe)*
Coaker, Vernon
Coffey, Ms Ann
Connarty, Michael
Cotter, Brian
Cousins, Jim
Davey, Edward *(Kingston)*
Davey, Valerie *(Bristol W)*
Davies, Rt Hon Denzil *(Llanelli)*
Davis, Rt Hon David *(Haltemprice & Howden)*
Day, Stephen
Dunwoody, Mrs Gwyneth
Fabricant, Michael
Fearn, Ronnie
Field, Rt Hon Frank
Forth, Rt Hon Eric
Foster, Don *(Bath)*
Foster, Michael Jabez *(Hastings)*
Garnier, Edward
George, Bruce *(Walsall S)*
Gerrard, Neil
Gibb, Nick
Gibson, Dr Ian
Gilroy, Mrs Linda
Gorman, Mrs Teresa
Gorrie, Donald
Green, Damian
Greenway, John
Griffiths, Nigel *(Edinburgh S)*
Hammond, Philip
Hanson, David
Harris, Dr Evan
Harvey, Nick
Hawkins, Nick
Healey, John
Hogg, Rt Hon Douglas
Howells, Dr Kim
Hughes, Kevin *(Doncaster N)*
Hughes, Simon *(Southwark N)*
Kidney, David
King, Andy *(Rugby & Kenilworth)*
Lansley, Andrew
Leslie, Christopher
Lewis, Dr Julian *(New Forest E)*
Loughton, Tim
Love, Andrew
Maclean, Rt Hon David
Maclennan, Rt Hon Robert
McNamara, Kevin
McNulty, Tony
MacShane, Denis
Mactaggart, Fiona
Mahon, Mrs Alice
Marshall–Andrews, Robert
Merron, Gillian
Michie, Mrs Ray *(Argyll & Bute)*
Moore, Michael
Naysmith, Dr Doug
Nicholls, Patrick
Oaten, Mark
Olner, Bill
Ottaway, Richard
Paterson, Owen
Pike, Peter L
Pope, Greg
Prior, David
Randall, John
Rendel, David
Russell, Bob *(Colchester)*
Ryan, Ms Joan
Savidge, Malcolm
Sayeed, Jonathan
Sedgemore, Brian
Shaw, Jonathan
Sheerman, Barry
Sheldon, Rt Hon Robert
Simpson, Keith *(Mid–Norfolk)*
Smith, Sir Robert *(W Ab'd'ns)*
Soley, Clive
Squire, Ms Rachel
Starkey, Dr Phyllis
Stunell, Andrew
Swayne, Desmond
Syms, Robert
Taylor, Ian *(Esher & Walton)*
Taylor, John M *(Solihull)*
Taylor, Matthew *(Truro)*
Tonge, Dr Jenny
Touhig, Don
Trend, Michael
Twigg, Stephen *(Enfield)*
Tyler, Paul
Tyrie, Andrew
Viggers, Peter
Vis, Dr Rudi
Ward, Ms Claire
Waterson, Nigel
Webb, Steve
Willis, Phil

Tellers for the Ayes:
Mr. David Heath and Mr. Adrian Sanders.

NOES

Atkinson, Peter *(Hexham)*
Beckett, Rt Hon Mrs Margaret
Betts, Clive
Boswell, Tim
Caplin, Ivor
Chapman, Ben *(Wirral S)*
Chapman, Sir Sydney *(Chipping Barnet)*
Cormack, Sir Patrick
Cran, James
Crausby, David
Dowd, Jim
Gapes, Mike
Heald, Oliver
Hill, Keith
Jackson, Ms Glenda *(Hampstead)*
Jamieson, David
Johnson, Miss Melanie *(Welwyn Hatfield)*
Jones, Ms Jenny *(Wolverh'ton SW)*
Key, Robert
Laing, Mrs Eleanor
Lait, Mrs Jacqui
Liddell, Rt Hon Mrs Helen
Lloyd, Rt Hon Sir Peter *(Fareham)*
MacShane, Denis
McWalter, Tony
Mandelson, Rt Hon Peter
Maxton, John
Pound, Stephen
Prentice, Ms Bridget *(Lewisham E)*
Raynsford, Nick
Ross, William *(E Londy)*
Ruffley, David
Spring, Richard
Tipping, Paddy
Whittingdale, John
Winterton, Ms Rosie *(Doncaster C)*
Young, Rt Hon Sir George

Tellers for the Noes:
Mrs. Marion Roe and Dr. Nick Palmer.

Question accordingly agreed to.

Main Question, as amended, agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House declines to approve the First Report from the Administration Committee (HC394) on the proposal to re-open the Line of Route during the Summer Adjournment until the full implications for entry into the Houses of Parliament at other times of the year, and other options for making these arrangements, are examined and costed.

Members' Travel

7.10 pm

The President of the Council and Leader of the House of Commons (Mrs. Margaret Beckett): I beg to move,

That the Resolution of 6th December 1991 relating to travel by Members to European Community Institutions be rescinded.

That, in the opinion of this House, provision should be made as from 1st April 1999 for reimbursing Members in respect of the cost of travelling on parliamentary duties between the United Kingdom and any European Union institution in Brussels, Luxembourg or Strasbourg or the national parliament of another European Union member state and any additional expenses necessarily incurred in such travelling, subject to the limit that

(1) the amount payable to a Member in any year, beginning with 1st April, shall not exceed the aggregate of—

(a) the cost of a return business class airfare for the journey on the assumption that the journey begins and ends at a London airport and that the destination is any of the three cities mentioned above or the location of the national parliament of a European Union member state; and

(b) twice the corresponding civil service class A standard subsistence rate for the time being in operation; and

(2) expenditure in pursuance of this Resolution within financial year 1999–2000 shall not exceed the total currently planned for expenditure on travel by Members to European Union institutions within that year.

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Mr. Michael Lord): I must tell the House that Madam Speaker has selected the following: amendment (a), to leave out the first reference to '1st April' and insert '1st November'.

Amendment (k), after subsection (1), insert

'(1A) a Member must submit in advance to the Fees Office a statement of the visit's purpose, location and duration and the persons or organisations to be met'.

Mrs. Beckett: This is a classic, although relatively minor, House matter, which has a slightly odd history. It would be wise to point out to the House—and, indeed, to one or two people from the media who seem to have been misled about it—that this is an issue in relation to which members of the Government have nothing whatever at stake.

The motion proposes to vary the scheme introduced nearly 10 years ago by the Conservative Government, which offers Members funding to make one journey a year to familiarise themselves with the workings of the European institutions—that is, the European Parliament or the Commission.

If the motion is passed, the funding made available—which has, I understand, never been increased, and in which no increase is proposed today—would be available either, as now, for one visit a year to those institutions, or, at the choice of a Member, for one visit a year to the Parliament of another member state instead. The low take-up of the fund suggests that at present it is of less use to Members than, presumably, its originators expected.

I see no particular virtue in preserving unchanged a scheme of little use or value if quite a minor change might make it more useful; and when the change was suggested, I was perfectly willing to see whether it would increase the value of the scheme to Members.

The motion has appeared on the Order Paper several times now. I freely confess that I had, mistakenly, assumed it to be non-contentious, as it involves a minor rule change and no—I repeat, no—extra funding. When an objection was first made, I therefore imagined that there was a misunderstanding as to what was intended. However, it now appears that there was no misunderstanding, but some real objection, and that is why the matter now comes before the House for debate as well as decision.

Before those who wish to see the matter debated get too excited or carried away, let me set out why I thought that this was not a matter of contention across the Floor of the House. The basic scheme was introduced under the Conservative Government—incidentally, all those who have objected so far were Ministers in that Government—and there is no extra funding to arouse concern.

Initially, it appeared that the objection might be based on a misunderstanding, as it was first suggested that the Chairman of the Public Accounts Committee had objected because his Committee had not been consulted. I wrote to the right hon. Member for Haltemprice and Howden (Mr. Davis) expressing dismay at any perceived discourtesy, but also some surprise, because the PAC seemed to have had no role hitherto in the setting up or administration of the scheme. Indeed, it is a little hard to see why it would.

Press reports have since suggested that some other objection is in fact entertained, and that can be aired here today.

Mr. Patrick McLoughlin (West Derbyshire): I think that the right hon. Lady is coming to the end of her remarks, so will she give us some information? What was the overall take-up of the previous system among hon. Members?

Mrs. Beckett: From memory, I believe that about 68 or 70 Members—certainly a small number—used a small proportion of the fund.

I repeat that, to me, the proposal seems a minor matter that might be of assistance and use to Back-Bench Members on both sides of the House—and, indeed, to those on the Opposition Front Bench. It is not of the slightest benefit in any way, shape or form to the Government. It is for the House to decide whether it wishes to deny itself that facility, and I invite it to make its decision.

7.14 pm

Mr. Eric Forth (Bromley and Chislehurst): The Leader of the House has been more or less accurate in her description of what brought this matter to the Floor of the House. There were repeated attempts to sneak it through quietly without debate, as many things go through the House, but I, and others, took the view that it was not a minor matter, as it involves a substantial sum of public money. It should be aired in public, because it involves Members voting themselves the opportunity to travel at taxpayers' expense. I would have thought that that was a reasonable matter for a public airing, and I am therefore pleased that we now have the opportunity briefly to debate the matter here, to have it out in the open and vote on it properly, so that everybody can see where everybody else stands.

[Mr. Eric Forth]

It is odd that the Leader of the House first said that this was a minor matter, and then went on to emphasise that there was no extra funding. I am glad that she now accepts the virtue of that claim. There was a time when Labour Members—perhaps even the right hon. Lady herself, in a previous incarnation—might have thought that extra funding was a virtue, but I am happy to see that she now regards the fact that there is no extra funding as a plus. At least we have moved some distance in that direction, for which I am grateful.

However, that is not the point at issue. The real issue is this: if one sets up a system with public funding—taxpayers' money—and there is a derisorily small take-up, since only a small proportion of Members of Parliament decide to spend that money travelling to European Union institutions in boring old Strasbourg, Luxembourg and Brussels, what does one do? I suggest that we scrap the scheme and save the taxpayer some money. Give the money back to the taxpayer and say, "MPs have been given a chance to travel at your expense. They haven't taken it up, so the most logical thing is to do away with the scheme."

Mr. Gerald Bermingham (St. Helens, South): I declare no interest, for the simple reason that I have never made myself available for any such trips to Europe, but I can see how the amended idea would have a great advantage. Does the right hon. Gentleman agree that as we are going in for afforestation, and new national forests have been set up, it might be useful for Members whose constituencies are involved to go to, say, Finland, which has a national afforestation policy, and learn about that?

Mr. Forth: If I thought that the Finnish national Parliament was in the middle of a forest, I might agree.

Allegedly—I shall say more about my reasons for using that term in a moment—the point of the scheme is for Members of Parliament to visit other national Parliaments. My point was that my preference, which I hope my vote will later be able to reflect, would be to scrap the whole scheme and hand the money back to the taxpayer.

Instead it is suggested that we say to Members, "I know that you didn't really want to go to boring places such as Strasbourg, Luxembourg or Brussels, so we shall offer you the chance to go somewhere more interesting." By including European Union capitals and Parliaments, we shall open up the possibility of Members going to Athens, Rome or Lisbon, for example. The hon. Member for St. Helens, South (Mr. Bermingham) has said that he wants to go to Helsinki. Good for him, but what we are debating is whether he should go at the taxpayers' expense.

Mr. David Maclean (Penrith and The Border): A wonderful new Center Parcs-type holiday experience centre has just been created in my constituency. On the basis of the logic of the hon. Member for St. Helens, South (Mr. Bermingham), I wonder whether it would be advantageous for me to travel to the south of Portugal this summer, or to the beaches of the south of France, or Disneyland in Paris, and see how they do such things there. The proposal is wide open to abuse, especially if we extend it further, as the hon. Member for St. Helens, South suggests.

Mr. Forth: That may be so, but my right hon. Friend will be acquainted with the wording of the motion that we are debating, which says that Members should be reimbursed for

"the cost of travelling on parliamentary duties between the United Kingdom and any European Union institution in Brussels, Luxembourg or Strasbourg or the national parliament of another European Union member state".

It is envisaged that Members of the Westminster Parliament will go to other national Parliaments. That seems a fairly open and shut case.

However, how we would define parliamentary duties, how we would satisfy ourselves that Members really were travelling on parliamentary duties, and how we would know what they did when they got where they were going is the subject of the amendment tabled by my right hon. Friend the Member for Haltemprice and Howden (Mr. Davis). No doubt he will speak to that in a moment, and I do not want to steal his thunder. However, there could be the merest question in some of our minds—I put it no more strongly than that—if hon. Members were able to travel at the taxpayer's expense to such places as Lisbon, Athens or Rome. I leave it to the imagination to decide whether their minds would be entirely concentrated on their parliamentary duties.

Mr. Peter Viggers (Gosport): I have used the scheme. As I am a member of the NATO parliamentary group, I visited Brussels, where I spent a day with the NATO parliamentary secretariat, and I also visited Strasbourg and saw the European Parliament, which did not impress me, although it broadened my experience. Does my right hon. Friend agree that there is a great difference between travelling to such institutions, where there is an infrastructure ready to receive the individual who wishes to broaden his knowledge of them, and travelling to Lisbon or Athens, turning up as a tripper at the front door, not speaking the language and with no proper infrastructure to receive visitors?

Mr. Forth: My hon. Friend raises an important point. My right hon. Friend's amendment touches on the extent to which we could satisfy ourselves that the trips were being made for a proper reason and carried out in a proper way. That is part of my argument against the motion, quite apart from the fact that it has been backdated to 1 April, which I find reprehensible.

When the measure was originally tabled, in an attempt to sneak it through quietly without debate, it was before 1 April. Now that we are returning to the matter almost into June, the movers have not even bothered to change the date. It seems to give some weird kind of retrospectivity—perhaps time travel is involved, as well as distance travel.

It appears that we could have travelled from 1 April onwards, according to the terms of the motion. Whether hon. Members could present their plane tickets from any journey made since 1 April is an interesting matter, to which I may or may not receive a reply towards the end of the debate. It strikes me as more than a little bizarre that we are being asked retrospectively to approve travel of a rather dubious nature.

I shall leave it to others to decide whether Members of Parliament should travel business class, but why they should get twice the corresponding civil service class A standard subsistence rate is beyond me. I should have thought that the civil service class A subsistence rate was quite sufficient for most Members of Parliament. The whole thing reeks of Members of Parliament voting themselves something rather splendid and jolly.

Given that hon. Members have not taken up the more modest offer that was available before, it is reprehensible that instead of doing away with the facility all together, the House is being asked to make it more attractive and to induce more of them to take up the possibility. The taxpayers must be agape at what is going on, at the very time when we in Westminster often criticise what is going on in Brussels in the European Commission, or in Strasbourg in the European Parliament.

We often criticise those institutions. We would lay ourselves open to similar accusations if the Members of the European Parliament said, "Are you not the people who did not take up the opportunity to come to Strasbourg and Brussels, but are now voting yourselves the opportunity to visit more exotic locations?" It simply is not good enough.

There is now little opportunity to amend the motion in the way that I originally intended. When we divide on it, I shall vote against it, because I believe that it is my duty to the taxpayer not to vote myself and my colleagues increased opportunities to travel at taxpayers' expense, but where possible—

Mr. Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield): Does the right hon. Gentleman not have a responsibility to his constituents to know something about how European institutions work, and to go to places such as Brussels and find out what is available for the benefit of constituents? Of course I know that the right hon. Gentleman has considerable experience of Brussels, as he was an MEP for five years. Presumably he travelled a great deal at that time and knows his way around, but many of us who have not been MEPs need to get there so that we can make the case for our constituencies, our regions and our country.

Mr. Forth: I hear what the hon. Gentleman is saying, but I do not agree that the taxpayer should pay for him to go with a begging bowl to get more taxpayers' money out of Brussels in order to recycle it back to this country. That has never appealed to me, and we should not encourage it.

The hon. Gentleman has been kind enough to point out that I have a passing knowledge of such matters. I was an MEP for five years, and I was also a member of the Council of Ministers for nearly nine years. My knowledge leads me to say that I am in no great hurry to return to those institutions, which I found profoundly unattractive—but that is a debate for another day.

The proposition before us is simple. It needs no gilding or elaboration. Either we say that the fund, not having been properly taken up, is returned to the taxpayer, or we vote ourselves the opportunity to spend it much more freely and much more frequently. I know which way I shall vote.

7.25 pm

Mr. David Davis (Haltemprice and Howden): The interesting part of the debate is the degree of misunderstanding of my purpose and that of my right hon. Friend the Member for Bromley and Chislehurst (Mr. Forth) in objecting to the motion. I know that the hon. Member for Rotherham (Mr. MacShane) will try to catch your eye later, Mr. Deputy Speaker. He seems to think that our objection is part of a Euro-sceptic plot. It is anything but that. If one took a Euro-sceptic perspective, one would encourage visits to national Parliaments rather than to European institutions.

The Leader of the House expressed another misunderstanding, which I have corrected in a letter to her. It was based on my comment to her Parliamentary Private Secretary when I was asked why I objected. I said that I was the Chairman of the Public Accounts Committee. It was not a matter of amour propre or of being consulted. I was concerned for the reputation of the House. The Public Accounts Committee was created in the first instance because of the poor reputation of public service in this country. My concern was to protect the reputation of the House.

There has been a decline in the reputation of this institution in the past few years, for a variety of reasons—alleged misconduct on the part of various Members, and harsher party politics. The criticism of democratic parliamentarians has been reinforced by recent allegations made against Members of the European Parliament. That has undoubtedly led to a loss of public trust in Members of Parliament.

It is vital to the authority of this institution that we maintain the public perception of the integrity of Members of Parliament. It is from that perspective that I address the issue. That integrity and that authority would not be helped by tabloid headlines about freebies over the next few years if, as my right hon. Friend argues, the scheme is misused.

In my view, the comments of the Leader of the House were a touch disingenuous when she spoke about the way in which the motion was first presented to the House. It was presented initially for resolution at the end of business on a Friday. Fortunately, I saw it and objected to it. I thought that the matter ought to be debated so that it would be clear and above board. It was then presented in a mixture of other motions, and was promptly withdrawn when it was seen that my right hon. Friend and I were in the House and were ready to object to it.

The supposedly non-controversial measure, to which my right hon. Friend and I clearly objected, was put up again on Thursday 6 May—the day of the local government elections, when it might have been expected that someone might not be present to object to it. Although I was in east Yorkshire, my right hon. Friend was here and did object to it.

Mr. Denis MacShane (Rotherham): The right hon. Gentleman lost three Tory seats as a result.

Mr. Davis: That is an interesting deduction, but not one to which I would subscribe.

The purpose of the measure seems to hinge on the argument that the £250,000 or thereabouts set aside for the scheme as it currently exists has not been used, so we had better find a way of using it. Like my right hon. Friend, I think that if public money is not spent, the proper course is for it to be returned to the taxpayer, not for some other, possibly spurious use to be found for it.

[Mr. Davis]

My hon. Friend the Member for West Derbyshire (Mr. McLoughlin) asked about the take-up of the scheme. Over the course of seven years, the amount of money spent out of the putative £250,000 has been as low as £29,000 in one year and £33,000 in another. The average take-up has been £44,500 out of budget of £250,000. It has clearly not attracted the interest of the vast majority of hon. Members. That is fine—I have no objection to it—and it is for Members to make their own decision. I am in favour of less spending, but I am perfectly happy for them to visit those institutions to inform themselves of how they work. Before Labour Members intervene, I should say that, unfortunately, I made 100 visits in three years.

Mr. Forth: But not using the fund.

Mr. Davis: No; because of my previous duties as a Minister.

There are legitimate purposes for foreign travel. I sit on the Liaison Committee and regularly make judgments on Select Committee travel, and I apply to every one the test of whether it is worth while, and of value to the taxpayer, for a Select Committee to travel to Australia to consider the issue of missing children or whatever issue it may be. No doubt there may be a number of purposes for which it is legitimate for Members to travel, but finding something for Government Back Benchers to do on difficult days is not one of them, and they do not necessarily include visiting capitals that are in the sunshine and near beaches.

My amendment is aimed at making sure that the fund is used for its proper purpose and I have asked the House to amend the motion by adding the words:

"a Member must submit in advance to the Fees Office a statement of the visit's purpose, location and duration and the persons or organisations to be met".

Making a statement of the purpose in advance is a straightforward and reasonable condition to be put on any use of public money.

Mr. David Heath (Somerton and Frome): If the right hon. Gentleman's amendment were passed, would not it achieve the additional purpose of fulfilling the intention of the amendment of the right hon. Member for Bromley and Chislehurst (Mr. Forth)? It would make the backdating inoperative because, by definition, no one could have made a submission before claiming the appropriate moneys.

Mr. Davis: The hon. Gentleman is entirely right. That would be an unintended, but extremely virtuous, outcome of the amendment. Anyone who had not submitted in advance his purpose for making a visit could not claim on the scheme, which is entirely sensible.

The House would be in an odd position if it did not refuse to give out taxpayers' money to a Member of Parliament to subsidise a trip to a foreign country somewhere in Europe without his saying in advance where he was going, why he was making the visit and what the benefit to the taxpayer was.

Mrs. Beckett: I have no particular objection to the right hon. Gentleman's amendment. If he is suggesting that he thinks that it would make the motion acceptable, I have no quarrel with it.

Mr. Maclean: That will not make the motion acceptable.

Mr. Davis: I say to my right hon. Friend that I have to answer for myself; I say to the right hon. Lady that I am not sure what the convention is.

The Parliamentary Secretary, Privy Council Office (Mr. Paddy Tipping): What is the right hon. Gentleman's opinion?

Mr. Davis: I shall answer in a second. The Minister is not in opposition; he must get used to sitting on the Treasury Bench, and perhaps I will answer him in my own time. *[Interruption.]* Perhaps the Minister will earn his salary in due course and will not have to fill my post.

Mr. Forth: The Minister is worth every penny.

Mr. Davis: Yes, but no more.

The amendment would make the scheme acceptable. If the Government can accept it, I should be happy to support the case that has been made on the basis that it written into the motion.

Mrs. Beckett: Perhaps I can provide further clarification for the right hon. Gentleman. The only reason why such a provision was not introduced initially by me is because there was a time, as he may know, when the Fees Office was reluctant to become involved—in any way, shape or form—in undertaking such a role. I understand that that reluctance no longer exists and I am perfectly happy to accept his amendment.

Mr. Davis: I thank the right hon. Lady. The simple fact is that Members of Parliament fill in forms ad nauseam. I seem to spend vast quantities of my weekends writing down where I have been in my own constituency, so I certainly do not think that a condition as light as this could not be administered by the Fees Office and I am glad that it is willing to do so. Is the right hon. Lady accepting my amendment?

Mrs. Beckett *indicated assent.*

Mr. Davis: In that case, my speech has achieved its objective and, I hope, saved the taxpayer several hundred thousand pounds.

7.35 pm

Mr. David Maclean (Penrith and The Border): I am glad that my right hon. Friend the Member for Haltemprice and Howden (Mr. Davis) can feel satisfied that his amendment has been accepted by the Government and that he now finds the motion acceptable, but I am afraid that I must apply a harsher test than that which the

Chairman of the Public Accounts Committee has applied. I have great respect for the work that he does as Chairman of that Committee, and I have no wish whatever to make a bid for his job, but I am afraid that I must adopt a tougher view of the expenditure of public money than the one which he has apparently adopted by graciously giving in to the Government tonight.

Mr. David Davis: I object to the notion that I have given in to the Government. So far as I can see, the Government have given in to me.

Mr. Maclean: Whatever this is, it is consensus and there is something rather vulgar about consensus when it involves the Chairman of the Public Accounts Committee and those on the Treasury Bench.

I listened with incredulity once again this week when the hon. Member for Huddersfield (Mr. Sheerman) suggested that it is our duty to our constituents to travel to Rome in August or to Lisbon—*[Interruption.]* He did not say August.

Mr. Sheerman: I am concerned, and have always been concerned, only with European institutions, particularly those in Brussels. Any Member of the House who does not know how the European institutions work and how to take advantage of them for his constituents is not doing his job properly and is not serving his constituents to the fullest extent.

Mr. Maclean: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for that clarification. It seems, therefore, that he is opposed to the extension of the scheme from Brussels and the European institutions to the other European capitals. I am sorry that I did him a disservice. I thought that he suggested in his intervention that it would be meritorious for us all to travel to those other European capitals and that it was our duty to our constituents to travel to Rome, Madrid, Athens and Paris—using taxpayers' money and at appropriate times of the year, of course—to study the national Parliaments and learn how they work so as to be better able to serve our constituents.

I must say that the hon. Gentleman is more persuasive than I am. I must admit that, using all my skills, I cannot sit opposite a constituent, look him or her in the eye and say, "I must have some of your money so that I can travel to Paris, Lisbon and Rome and to the other European Parliaments at your expense to make me a better MP so that I am more knowledgeable of the affairs of those countries and better able to do my duty to you." Who are we kidding?

A scheme has been proposed by the Government, but we can tell from its history that they know that it is bad politics. That is why they tried to sneak it in on numerous occasions after 10 o'clock at night and why they tried to bounce it through on the nod on Fridays, and on many other occasions. They know fine that it would not wash if the public—our constituents—found out that the House had extended an unused scheme for Members of Parliament to visit Brussels, Luxembourg and European institutions.

It seems that the scheme is used by less than a tenth of the Members of the House, but, because we are not working that scheme and are not taking up the amount of taxpayers' money that we have already allocated to ourselves, we have decided to make the scheme sexier and make it more likely that we will soak up the taxpayers' money by adding some juicier and more exciting capitals.

Mrs. Beckett: First, I remind the right hon. Gentleman that the scheme is in no way in the interests of the Government, because Ministers are covered if they need to travel on parliamentary business.

Secondly, the right hon. Gentleman has not been in opposition very long—although I feel confident that, given the way that he is carrying on, he will get plenty of practice—so what I know from my experience as an Opposition Member may not have occurred to him. That is that there are occasions when hon. Members, of all parties, are engaged in business that means that it is beneficial, sensible and helpful to liaise with politicians in other member states.

Visits of various kinds are arranged for that purpose. In opposition, many Labour Members had to make such visits at their own expense. Those visits were not for pleasure, but were in pursuit of parliamentary business. On the basis of that experience, it seemed to me only sensible to propose an extension to the scheme.

Finally, and even more briefly, the right hon. Gentleman and the right hon. Member for Bromley and Chislehurst (Mr. Forth) have every right to object to the motion and to insist on it being debated. However, the right hon. Gentleman is talking about the reputation of Parliament. Nothing does more harm to that than the continued assertion by Members of Parliament that every foreign trip is a jaunt. He is kidding himself if he thinks that the public do not make a distinction between the sort of cases that he describes and worthwhile trips by Select Committees.

Mr. Maclean: I am grateful for that long exposition by the right hon. Lady. However, I have been in opposition for the same number of days as she has been in government. One day, perhaps, we shall both be better at our respective roles.

Of course there is no advantage to Ministers in the proposal, but there certainly is to Government Back Benchers, that vast army of the bored unemployed. That army is not so vast tonight, of course, because so many Labour Members have pressing business in their constituencies. However, it is in the Government's interest that that vast army should be out of the House when contentious debates are coming up, whether they be on the Immigration and Asylum Bill, or on cutting welfare benefits or disability benefits. Those contentious debates may well turn out to be very convenient moments for Government Back Benchers to acquaint themselves with the workings of the Athens Parliament.

Mr. Sheerman: It dismays many Government Members—and some Opposition Members too—when the right hon. Gentleman continually makes assertions that lower the reputation for integrity of Members of the House. I find it offensive. The right hon. Gentleman rejects even the notion that, in some senses, we are in a European federal state, and he believes that we should not travel throughout Europe. Some people do not like what

[Mr. Sheerman]

they call the F word, but I find it offensive that the right hon. Gentleman considers that those who believe in a European democracy that works only do so for a free trip.

Mr. Maclean: I do not believe that the trips are free. They are free for Members of Parliament, but they are paid for by our constituents. What is the justification for that?

Of course the Leader of the House is right to say that Ministers gain no advantage through the proposal, and that not every foreign trip is a jaunt. When the Deputy Prime Minister was in India, Mauritius and other places at Easter or during the Budget, we all know that that was not a jaunt. Of course not: the scuba diving was essential to his understanding of the conditions in those countries, which he clearly intended to adopt in his integrated transport policy for this country. I look forward to the scuba diving aspect being implemented in some way in Hull, or Huddersfield, or elsewhere.

Of course, Ministers need some recreation time on foreign trips, which involve a lot of hard work, as I know for a fact. If one does not take control of the programme, the embassy will have one working from 4 o'clock in the morning until midnight. I have no complaint about the work that Ministers do, but no Back Bencher should ever pretend that all foreign trips are arduous and tough. That is not the case. We can make them arduous if we wish, but there is no need for the money that has not been taken up to be soaked up by being spread across other institutions in Europe.

The justification for the proposal is to soak up the money in that way. It is not that there has suddenly emerged a pressing need to learn about the workings of Parliaments in other European countries. My right hon. Friend the Member for Bromley and Chislehurst (Mr. Forth) tabled an amendment about visiting NATO countries. I shall not speak to it as it was not selected, but it is equally valid. Given that the Government are straining the special relationship between Britain and Washington—the Foreign Secretary is wrecking it daily—it may be more important for Members of Parliament to visit Washington to repair the damage. However, if the Government can justify trips to Lisbon, Madrid, Athens and Rome, it is equally meritorious to visit the capitals of our NATO allies. The point is that I do not see any need for visits by Back Bench Members to other European capitals to be funded at the taxpayer's expense.

I support the view advocated by my right hon. Friend the Member for Bromley and Chislehurst, even though the amendment tabled by my right hon. Friend the Member for Haltemprice and Howden has been accepted by the Government. That amendment merely puts some appropriate accountancy ethics into a system that is fundamentally wrong. I hope that I will have an opportunity to oppose the principle behind the proposal, even though that amendment has been accepted.

7.46 pm

Sir George Young (North-West Hampshire): I shall intervene briefly, as so far the debate has featured contributions from individual Opposition Back Benchers. We on the Opposition Front Bench, who have responsibility for monitoring and scrutinising legislation, have a slightly different perspective.

The Conservative party does not have a view on this matter, and we are on a free vote. My right hon. Friends the Members for Bromley and Chislehurst (Mr. Forth), for Penrith and The Border (Mr. Maclean), and for Haltemprice and Howden (Mr. Davis) are perfectly entitled to insist that matters such as this are debated in the House. I want to put in on record that I have never been on a Select Committee visit overseas, but I have used this scheme. About a year ago, right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Folkestone and Hythe (Mr. Howard), the shadow Foreign Secretary, and I went to Brussels. We had some very useful visits and worked quite hard.

I do not follow the logic, however, that the scheme should be scrapped. Given that more and more legislation comes from Europe, it is important for Opposition Front Benchers to maintain contacts with European institutions, so I do not think that scrapping the scheme would be right.

I have no difficulty with the amendment tabled by my right hon. Friend the Member for Haltemprice and Howden. When I used the scheme, I had to state where I was going and why, so the Fees Office has some capacity to monitor the scheme. It is within the experience of many hon. Members that the Fees Office has the capacity to interrogate us about the purpose of telephone calls to America. That means that it has some capacity to track down what we get up to in other countries.

I was delighted to hear that the Leader of the House finds amendment (k) acceptable. If that is the case, I shall be happy to support the motion, as amended.

7.47 pm

Mr. Denis MacShane (Rotherham): I confess that I may be the onlie begetter of this proposal. I raised in opposition, and again as a Government Back Bencher, the idea that there should be stronger relations between the House of Commons and other national Parliaments. When I was elected five years ago, I was surprised to discover that one could not make a telephone call to Europe, or send a letter there, or discharge one's duties to constituents if that involved going to Europe.

Frankly, tonight I would rather be in Barcelona, but as soon as the debate ends I must change into a dinner jacket and repair to the German embassy for a dinner in honour of the right hon. Member for Old Bexley and Sidcup (Sir E. Heath), that well-known Conservative hero. As a Back Bencher, I feel a bit nervous about taking on three Conservative Privy Councillors opposed to the proposal.

Mr. David Davis: Only two.

Mr. MacShane: I am told that the number is down to two. We are seeing a bit of a split. This is the beginning of big-tent politics—Patten Tuesday, Goodlad and Davis today. Things are moving forward as the right hon. Member for Haltemprice and Howden (Mr. Davis) comes on board with the Government side.

A couple of points are worth making. I asked the House of Commons Library how much it costs per hour to run this place. The answer is £150,000. We have already spent a good part of that because the right hon. Members for Bromley and Chislehurst (Mr. Forth) and for Haltemprice and Howden objected to this proposal, which we flagged up in opposition and in government as an issue that

needed to be considered. The right hon. Gentlemen who complain that we should not spend taxpayers' money have turned the tap on full in the past 40 minutes.

A moment ago we voted not to decrease public expenditure by charging foreign visitors to come to the House of Commons in the summer. Hon. Members have a right to do that, but they then have no right to say that they are defenders of the public purse. As my right hon. Friend the Leader of the House said, we are not increasing the vote of the House—it is not Government money—by a single penny.

I should have thought that this proposal would appeal to the more Europhobe Conservative Members. They should endorse a measure that would increase the connections and relationships between the national Parliaments of Europe.

Mr. Davis: I want to correct the hon. Gentleman, because he is misquoting his Front-Bench colleagues. They said that no more money would be allocated, which is not the same as saying that no more money would be spent. In the past seven years, the amount allocated has been £250,000 a year, whereas the amount spent has been £44,000 a year. If the scheme succeeds in its stated intent, the amount spent will increase to £250,000, so spending will increase. We should not be under that misapprehension.

Mr. MacShane: That depends on the take-up, and the evidence is that, under the existing scheme, a maximum of between 70 and 100 hon. Members take it up. That money has been voted by Parliament, so the full amount could be spent. It has not been spent, and this scheme will not increase that voted expenditure by a single penny. I would be interested to know, as someone who likes to count the figures, where the non-spent money goes. The right hon. Member for Haltemprice and Howden is the Chairman of the Public Accounts Committee, so perhaps he will look into that.

Each hon. Member can, if he so chooses, go up and down to his constituency once, twice, three or four times a day travelling first class or claiming mileage. There is no examination of how that money is spent. If we want to represent this Parliament's interests in other national Parliaments or to represent our constituents' interests abroad—a large number of people work in Europe and maintain an address in this country, and more than half our trade is with European Union countries—it is absurd to suggest that such travel should be stopped.

Alternatively, we could find other sources of funding for these trips. We could phone up the owner of Harrods and ask for a weekend in the Ritz. We could go on other junkets and do far more damage to the good name of the House. Unless we found an external source to pay for such trips, they could not take place.

I have no shame in arguing that case. I am grateful that my colleagues on the Front Bench have accepted the excellent suggestion of the right hon. Member for Haltemprice and Howden. I think that we should be upfront, and that this information should be made public. That is far better than using alternative sources of money.

Mr. Maclean: If the hon. Gentleman thinks that we should be upfront, would it be acceptable for a list to be published each year stating where each Member went, the cost of the trip and what they did?

Mr. MacShane: I would have no problem with that. If hon. Members provide a full record, all that information is published in the Register of Members' Interests. The right hon. Member for Haltemprice and Howden said that, as a Minister, he went to Europe 100 times.

Mr. Davis: To Brussels.

Mr. MacShane: He went 100 times to Brussels. I thought that he meant that he had made 100 trips to other European capitals while serving as a Minister. In *The Guardian* today, the right hon. Gentleman, speaking as Chairman of the Public Accounts Committee, said:

"It is important that members of select committees should travel abroad so that Parliament is kept informed."

The article says that the total bill is £450,000, which is 10 times what is spent at the moment on the measure that we are discussing. I am not a member of a Select Committee or a right hon. Gentleman, and I find it slightly offensive that Ministers can travel to Europe as often as they want, and that members of Select Committees can spend £500,000 of taxpayers' money as and when they please. There is one difference. The right hon. Gentleman said:

"I look at the costs against the cost of equivalent ministerial trips—MPs travel club class while ministers travel first class."

I am happy to table a third amendment requiring them to travel economy class, if that helps to win support.

Mr. Davis: It would certainly help to win my support. The hon. Gentleman shows what is wrong with the thought processes behind the measure. He seems to see this as a division of spoils. I did not read the article from which he is quoting, but I told the journalist that what matters is that taxpayers benefit from taxpayers' money—full stop; nothing else. If the hon. Gentleman thinks of this as a division of spoils between Front Benchers and Back Benchers, that is entirely the wrong approach. The right approach is to ask who pays for it and who gains from it. It should be the taxpayer who gains from it, not Members of Parliament.

Mr. MacShane: One bitter lesson that we have learned under new Labour is not to give interviews to journalists from *The Guardian*. The right hon. Gentleman might follow that advice. He is saying that paid trips are okay for Ministers and for members of Select Committees, but Back Benchers can get stuffed. I speak for Back Benchers. [HON. MEMBERS: "Oh!"] I speak for some of them, and I speak for members of the Opposition Front Bench, for members of the Government and for the right hon. Member for Haltemprice and Howden. I hope that this measure will go through.

Mr. Dale Campbell-Savours (Workington): I went to Europe under this arrangement three years ago during an argument over the future of the Campbell Soups factory in my constituency. I talked to an official, and when I came back to the United Kingdom I briefed the GMB union on what I had learned. The union brought a series of actions and the Campbell Soups company had to pay hundreds of thousands of pounds in compensation. That shows how effectively the scheme works. That was achieved because I managed to track down a Commission official who knew all about an obscure area of European law.

Mr. MacShane: I am grateful for that practical example of how the scheme can work. I believe that it

[Mr. MacShane]

will enhance the ability of hon. Members to discharge their duties, and it will bring the national Parliaments of the European Union a bit closer together. I do not believe that the taxpayers—our voters—will object to this amount of money being spent. I commend this motion to the House, and I hope that it is passed, as amended.

Amendment proposed: (k), in line 16, at end insert

'(1A) a Member must submit in advance to the Fees Office a statement of the visit's purpose, location and duration and the persons or organisations to be met'.—[*Mr. David Davis.*]

Question, That the amendment be made, *put and agreed to.*

Main Question, as amended, put:—

The House divided: Ayes 108, Noes 5.

Division No. 200] **[7.59 pm**

AYES

Allan, Richard
Ancram, Rt Hon Michael
Anderson, Donald *(Swansea E)*
Arbuthnot, Rt Hon James
Ashdown, Rt Hon Paddy
Barnes, Harry
Beckett, Rt Hon Mrs Margaret
Begg, Miss Anne
Beggs, Roy
Beith, Rt Hon A J
Bennett, Andrew F
Bermingham, Gerald
Betts, Clive
Boswell, Tim
Bradley, Keith *(Withington)*
Brake, Tom
Burnett, John
Burstow, Paul
Cabom, Rt Hon Richard
Campbell, Rt Hon Menzies *(NE Fife)*
Campbell–Savours, Dale
Caplin, Ivor
Chapman, Ben *(Wirral S)*
Chidgey, David
Coffey, Ms Ann
Cohen, Harry
Collins, Tim
Connarty, Michael
Cormack, Sir Patrick
Cotter, Brian
Cousins, Jim
Davis, Rt Hon David *(Haltemprice & Howden)*
Dowd, Jim
Emery, Rt Hon Sir Peter
Etherington, Bill
Fearn, Ronnie
Gapes, Mike
Garnier, Edward
George, Bruce *(Walsall S)*
Gibson, Dr Ian
Gilroy, Mrs Linda
Gorrie, Donald
Harris, Dr Evan
Heald, Oliver
Healey, John
Heath, David *(Somerton & Frome)*
Henderson, Ivan *(Harwich)*
Howells, Dr Kim
Hughes, Kevin *(Doncaster N)*
Jamieson, David
Johnson, Miss Melanie *(Welwyn Hatfield)*
Jones, Ms Jenny *(Wolverh'ton SW)*
Keen, Ann *(Brentford & Isleworth)*
Key, Robert
King, Andy *(Rugby & Kenilworth)*
Laing, Mrs Eleanor
Lansley, Andrew
Liddell, Rt Hon Mrs Helen
Linton, Martin
Love, Andrew
McIntosh, Miss Anne
McIsaac, Shona
McLoughlin, Patrick
McNamara, Kevin
McNulty, Tony
MacShane, Denis
Mahon, Mrs Alice
Maxton, John
Merron, Gillian
Michie, Mrs Ray *(Argyll & Bute)*
Moore, Michael
Moran, Ms Margaret
O'Brien, Mike *(N Warks)*
Olner, Bill
Ottaway, Richard
Page, Richard
Pike, Peter L
Pope, Greg
Pound, Stephen
Prentice, Ms Bridget *(Lewisham E)*
Prior, David
Rendel, David
Rowlands, Ted
Russell, Bob *(Colchester)*
Ryan, Ms Joan
Savidge, Malcolm
Sedgemore, Brian
Shaw, Jonathan
Smyth, Rev Martin *(Belfast S)*
Starkey, Dr Phyllis
Steen, Anthony
Stunell, Andrew
Syms, Robert
Taylor, John M *(Solihull)*
Taylor, Matthew *(Truro)*
Tipping, Paddy
Tonge, Dr Jenny
Twigg, Stephen *(Enfield)*
Tyler, Paul
Tyrie, Andrew
Vaz, Keith
Vis, Dr Rudi
Ward, Ms Claire
Webb, Steve
Whittingdale, John
Willis, Phil
Winterton, Ms Rosie *(Doncaster C)*
Young, Rt Hon Sir George

Tellers for the Ayes:
Mr. David Hanson and
Mr. Keith Hill.

NOES

Lewis, Dr Julian *(New Forest E)*
Randall, John
Sanders, Adrian
Swayne, Desmond
Viggers, Peter

Tellers for the Noes:
Mr. Eric Forth and
Mr. David Maclean.

Question accordingly agreed to.

Resolved,

That the Resolution of 6th December 1991 relating to travel by Members to European Community Institutions be rescinded.

That, in the opinion of this House, provision should be made as from 1st April 1999 for reimbursing Members in respect of the cost of travelling on parliamentary duties between the United Kingdom and any European Union institution in Brussels, Luxembourg or Strasbourg or the national parliament of another European Union member state and any additional expenses necessarily incurred in such travelling, subject to the limit that

(1) the amount payable to a Member in any year, beginning with 1st April, shall not exceed the aggregate of—

(a) the cost of a return business class airfare for the journey on the assumption that the journey begins and ends at a London airport and that the destination is any of the three cities mentioned above or the location of the national parliament of a European Union member state; and

(b) twice the corresponding civil service class A standard subsistence rate for the time being in operation; and

(1A)a Member must submit in advance to the Fees Office a statement of the visit's purpose, location and duration and the persons or organisations to be met; and

(2) expenditure in pursuance of this Resolution within financial year 1999–2000 shall not exceed the total currently planned for expenditure on travel by Members to European Union institutions within that year.

Opposition Parties (Financial Assistance)

8.9 pm

The President of the Council and Leader of the House of Commons (Mrs. Margaret Beckett): I beg to move,

That, in the opinion of this House, the provisions of this Resolution should have effect in relation to the giving of financial assistance to opposition parties in this House:

1.—(1) Financial assistance to assist an opposition party in carrying out its Parliamentary Business shall be available under this paragraph at any time on or after 1st April 1999 if at that time one of the following conditions is satisfied with respect to the party, that is to say

(a) there are at that time at least two Members of this House who are members of the party and who were elected at the previous General Election after contesting it as candidates for the party; or

(b) there is at that time one such Member who was so elected and the aggregate of the votes cast in favour of all the party's candidates at that Election was at least 150,000.

I do not propose to detain the House for long, but I think that one or two things should be put on record. The motion gives the lie to many wild and unsubstantiated allegations that the Government hold Parliament in contempt. It is we who introduced the scheme for the funding of Opposition parties, and it is we who are extending and modernising that scheme today.

It is some 24 years since my predecessor Edward Short introduced the scheme that now bears his name. He said then that it was

"to enable Opposition parties more effectively to fulfil their parliamentary duties."—[*Official Report*, 20 March 1975; Vol. 888, c. 1869.]

That proposal came when more demands were being made on our politicians and on our parties for greater professionalism than ever before. The concept of the gentleman amateur was being superseded in politics, as elsewhere in life.

In recent years, those demands have been ratcheted up another gear. More pressure is being put on Members of all parties and on the parties themselves, but it is put especially on the parties of Opposition more effectively to match the Government of the day.

In opposition, we argued for the move to provide proper funding for Opposition parties. For the record, I say, perhaps a little gently, to the Conservative party that many in the party resisted the move for some years. However, it has long seemed to Labour Members that the resources made available properly to carry out the role in the House were inadequate for their purpose. It is for that, among other, reasons that, in government, we set up the Neill committee to examine and to recommend on the matter.

The Government are grateful to Lord Neill and to his colleagues for their work and proposals, to which we have given the most careful consideration. One of their proposals in this area—the proposal for a policy development fund, to which all partes will have access—requires further legislation and will have to await such an opportunity, but I make it plain that the Government accept that proposal in principle, and will legislate on it when parliamentary time allows.

Basic Opposition funding does not require such a delay. Hence, I lay our proposals before the House in the order that is before us. They do not mirror the Neill proposals in every respect, but they do follow his most important recommendation that overall funding should be increased "substantially, perhaps by as much as three times".

The motion increases the constituent parts of the existing formula—one which takes account both of votes cast and of seats won—by a factor of 2.7. It reflects the recommendation that there should be, in addition to the increase in basic Short money, a separately identified sum specifically for the office of the Leader of the Opposition, in recognition of the constitutional role played by, and thus the specific demands on, the holder of that post.

Lord Neill's committee recommended a fixed allocation of money for the official Opposition, irrespective of the outcome of an election in seats or votes, but without making a specific recommendation of an alternative formula, or method of calculation. After very careful consideration, the Government remained of the view that the existing formula, well-tried as it is, still provided the best basis for reaching such decisions.

The principal outcome of the Neill committee's work, in that respect, was the proposal substantially to increase funding for Opposition parties' parliamentary work. The Government have thoroughly honoured that recommendation. There is no doubt that the sums of money being provided for Opposition parties exceed, by a substantial amount, anything that has previously been seen. Indeed, I suspect that they exceed what anyone, including Conservative Members, might have expected. However, Labour Members believe that Parliament will be stronger as a result of the measure. I invite the House to accept the proposition.

8.13 pm

Sir George Young (North-West Hampshire): Like the Leader of the House, we are grateful to Lord Neill and to his committee for their deliberations and conclusions. The right hon. Lady moved the motion in a non-confrontational mode; I shall respond in similar mode—I hope as briefly and quickly as she did.

The view of my party on the proposal is that, while the assistance offered is slightly less than what was recommended by the Neill committee and has been slow in arriving, it is all that we are going to get from the Administration. On that basis, I will support the recommendation. It is certainly preferable to the alternative.

The Neill committee concluded that the funds were inadequate for the purpose for which they were originally intended. Therefore, for the past two years, the Opposition have been surviving without the resources to which the Neill committee felt that we were entitled. However, those on the Opposition Front Bench have made bricks without straw. In the past 10 days, the Government have not had everything their own way. I pay tribute to the Back Benchers who are present, who are here presumably out of altruism because there is nothing in the motion for them, but who have been effective in harrying the Government. Of course, all Opposition parties owe a debt of gratitude to the Library, whose professionalism informs so many debates in the Chamber.

It cannot be right, with government becoming ever more complex and with power drifting away from Parliament to the Executive, for Opposition parties to be

[Sir George Young]

under-resourced, particularly when, as the Neill committee identifies, the Government have increased substantially, from taxpayers' money, the resources that they receive for their own special advisers.

The Neill committee identifies the figures. The Government spent £3.6 million on special advisers in the first year of the current Parliament; we received under £1 million. That has now risen to £3.9 million. The increase in special advisers happened virtually overnight, whereas the comparable increase in our own special advisers is having to wait two years.

It would be churlish to criticise the Government for what is happening. I think that the House is anxious to make good progress. A healthy democracy depends on a well-briefed, well-resourced Opposition. That is good for government as well. Our democracy will not be quite as healthy as Lord Neill prescribed, but it is a very good start.

Question put and agreed to.

Select Committees (Quorum)

8.16 pm

The Parliamentary Secretary, Privy Council Office (Mr. Paddy Tipping): I beg to move,

That, for the remainder of the present Session of Parliament, Standing Order No. 152 (Select Committees related to government departments) shall have effect subject to the following modification in line 48, at the end to add—

'(4A) Notwithstanding paragraphs (2) and (4) above, where more than two committees or sub-committees appointed under this order meet concurrently in accordance with paragraph (4)(e) above, the quorum of each such committee or sub-committee shall be two.'.

I am pleased to move a short, practical and time-limited motion. It has been brought to the House following a request from my hon. Friend the Member for Merthyr Tydfil and Rhymney (Mr. Rowlands). He has the unique distinction of being the first Member to chair a concurrent meeting of four Select Committees. The four—Foreign Affairs, Trade and Industry, Defence and International Development—are considering the first annual report on strategic export controls, which was published by the Government last year.

Each of the four Committees has a quorum of three and a membership of 11—12 in the case of the Foreign Affairs Committee. When they meet, at least three members from each Committee must be present—a total of 12—if they are to take evidence. The absence of one member debars his colleagues from the same Committee from asking questions of witnesses. Not unnaturally, it has not always been possible to get all 12 members together at the same time.

The Chairman suggested a temporary amendment to the Standing Orders to provide, in those circumstances, for the quorum to be two from each Committee, making a total of eight. That is for the process only of evidence taking and deliberating. If the Committees decide to produce a report, it will still need to be agreed by each Committee in turn, while fully quorate.

The Select Committees have combined in an innovative way and have come across an unforeseen difficulty. It is an issue that may become increasingly common as Select Committees pursue cross-departmental concerns. The House may need to consider the matter again at a future stage.

I understand that there have been difficulties with quorum in two Select Committee meetings jointly to consider single gateways. The motion as it stands will not help them, but I am willing to look at that matter again in consultation with the relevant House Committees, if necessary. With that, I hope that the House will approve the motion.

8.18 pm

Sir Patrick Cormack (South Staffordshire): Yet again this evening, I find myself in agreement with Ministers. The Parliamentary Secretary, Privy Council Office made the case clearly and cogently. It is one with which we are entirely happy to concur.

I make two brief points. First, Select Committees are always at their best if they are rather more than quorate. I hope that the motion will not be taken as any encouragement for Members to stay away. Secondly, it behoves us all to look carefully at the structure and

timetabling of Committees in the House to make it easier for Members to fulfil both their Committee commitments and their responsibilities in the Chamber.

With those two minor caveats, I am happy on behalf of the Opposition Front-Bench team to support the motion.

8.20 pm

Mr. Ted Rowlands (Merthyr Tydfil and Rhymney): I am very grateful to my hon. Friend the Parliamentary Secretary, Privy Council Office for moving the motion. The motion arises from an extraordinarily unique situation in which we are trying to develop a joint Committee—comprising four Select Committees, which is in itself a pretty formidable exercise—to inquire into the annual report on strategic export controls.

We have already met, and I believe that the position will be fully protected, so that every member of every Committee will be entitled to attend. When the joint Committee's reports are prepared, the whole Committees will be able to participate.

We feel that, in dealing with the nitty-gritty of the Committee's work, a quorum of three members per Committee would be not only onerous, but difficult for us in dealing with our business from one minute to the next. The motion contains a very modest request on an experimental matter, and I think that the House should support it and give the arrangement a chance to work.

The joint Committee is the first one in which four Select Committees have been combined in this way. It will be very interesting to see how the Committee proceeds, especially as we shall have to proceed by consensus. We shall have to wait to see how well we do in that.

We believe that the Committee has the job of scrutinising the Government's very important initiative on a joint inquiry into the first annual report on strategic export controls, and I really do believe that the House should give us the chance to try to make that process work. I am making the request on behalf not of one side of the House or one Committee, but of both sides of the House and all the Committees—who asked me, as Chairman, to write to my right hon. Friend the Leader of the House to ask for the motion to be tabled and moved. I hope that the House will support it.

8.21 pm

Mr. David Heath (Somerton and Frome): There is a consensus on the issue on both sides of the House. I concur entirely with the comments of the hon. Member for Merthyr Tydfil and Rhymney (Mr. Rowlands), who is my Chairman on the joint Committee on strategic arms exports. I also note that, if this were a sitting of the Foreign Affairs Committee, we would be quorate.

However, there is a real difficulty in the way in which the quadripartite Committee has been established—which is not to say that Liberal Democrat Members do not welcome its establishment or are not determined to make it work. The sad fact is that the House's Standing Orders do not make it easy for joint Committees to operate. I suggest to the Minister, in commending the motion to the House, that that matter should perhaps be considered, either in the Modernisation Committee or elsewhere, so that we might establish an apparatus enabling an ad hoc joint Committee—as this one is—to work effectively.

I do not think that the matter dealt with in the motion is the only procedural problem that the Committee will experience as we do our work. However, I am sure that we shall find ways of avoiding the pitfalls that the hon. Member for Merthyr Tydfil and Rhymney has described. Nevertheless, I foresee all sorts of difficulties, such as when the various Select Committees, having agreed one of the quadripartite Committee's reports, propose different and various amendments to it in their own Committees. We shall have to determine how to resolve those differences, should they arise.

I hope that the Committee will be able to work by consensus. I have some confidence that, under the able chairmanship of the hon. Member for Merthyr Tydfil and Rhymney, we shall be able to do so. However, we shall have to find an apparatus enabling the system to work.

8.23 pm

Mr. Dale Campbell-Savours (Workington): I should like to make a somewhat different speech on the matter by dealing with an issue that I do not think the House has yet fully considered—the implications of the joint Committee for the work of the Intelligence and Security Committee. Perhaps I should explain that that Committee is not quite a Select Committee of the House of Commons, but was established under the provisions of the Intelligence Services Act 1994. It is essentially a Committee that is appointed by the Prime Minister, although it is not a Committee of Parliament.

When I first heard about the establishment of the joint Committee—chaired by my hon. Friend the Member for Merthyr Tydfil and Rhymney (Mr. Rowlands)—on the annual report on strategic export controls, it seemed to me quite obvious—

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Mr. Michael Lord): Order. The hon. Gentleman is slightly off the mark; he must restrict his remarks precisely to the matter of the quorum.

Mr. Campbell-Savours: I thought that, although the Intelligence and Security Committee is not a Committee of Parliament, it should have been represented on the Joint Committee—which deals specifically with issues that are relevant to the work of the Intelligence and Security Committee. I should have thought that, in ideal circumstances—were the Intelligence and Security Committee a parliamentary Committee—we should ourselves want to have a quorum of at least two people from that Committee on the joint Committee, to ensure that its proceedings are properly reported back to our Committee. Regrettably, however, that is not to be the case.

I am taking this opportunity simply to flag up once again the principle that the Intelligence and Security Committee should be a fully parliamentary Committee.

8.25 pm

Mr. Donald Anderson (Swansea, East): I am tempted to follow my hon. Friend the Member for Workington (Mr. Campbell–Savours) along the path of the Intelligence and Security Committee, and the particular problems in relation to intelligence that were raised in the Foreign Affairs Committee's inquiry into Sierra Leone, but I suspect that, were I to do so, I should be properly cut off very quickly by you, Mr. Deputy Speaker.

[Mr. Donald Anderson]

I was also tempted to intervene in the speech of my hon. Friend the Member for Merthyr Tydfil and Rhymney (Mr. Rowlands), if only to allow him to get his breath back. However, I shall just make a general point—in what is, essentially, a very quorate Foreign Affairs Committee—on the peculiar problems highlighted by the quadripartite Committee.

The fact that each Department is monitored by one House Select Committee creates a certain inflexibility. We have come across that problem in dealing with Europe, for example, as we have no European Select Committee with our continental partners.

Some of us attended the joint Committee's first meeting, at which my hon. Friend the Member for Merthyr Tydfil did extremely well in steering us through some of the pitfalls that became readily apparent. Clearly, the normal concept of one Department, one Committee cannot easily be adapted under our current Standing Orders to accommodate this new creation of a quadripartite Committee. Everyone accepts that it would be absurd if the same Minister had to appear before four separate Select Committees—the Select Committees on Trade and Industry, Foreign Affairs, Defence and International Development—to go over, in total duplication, the same ground.

It was therefore quite proper that the new creation should somehow be grafted on to our system. However, in that first meeting, it became apparent that—as the hon. Member for Somerton and Frome (Mr. Heath) said—we shall have to consider very carefully the inflexibilities that have arisen in the Select Committee system. I should hope that, after a due period of experience, we shall return to a consideration of ways and means of adapting our Standing Orders to the new creation.

Let us proceed as best we can. If people of ill will wish to make life in Committee very difficult for my hon. Friend the Member for Merthyr Tydfil and Rhymney, they will certainly be able to do so, particularly in the relationship between the newly created Committee and the other Committees, and in the agreement—or non-agreement—of its subsequent reports.

Today, however, let us give the motion a fair wind. The matter will have to return to the House—so that our Standing Orders may be reconsidered, and so that we may, through experience, ensure that the new Committee is established properly within our Standing Orders to work and to avoid duplication.

8.29 pm

Mr. John Healey (Wentworth): I welcome the motion, but regret its limitation in applying only

"where more than two committees or sub-committees appointed under this order meet concurrently".

Two Select Committee inquiries in which Select Committees have combined forces are currently under way. The first is the joint Committee on strategic export controls—which has given rise to the motion—and the second is the joint inquiry into the single work-focused gateway by the Select Committee on Social Security and my own Employment Sub-Committee. While the Social Security Committee has the standard 11 members, the Employment Sub-Committee has only eight and in practice has only seven, because the hon. Member for Epping Forest (Mrs. Laing) has been promoted to the Front Bench and we have been waiting many months for a replacement.

Some may feel that we are slacking if we are unable to find three of our seven for meetings of the joint Committee, but we are also pursuing a joint inquiry with the Education Sub-Committee on access for all to further and higher education and on the barriers to employment and education for disabled people. The Sub-Committee is also concluding an inquiry into the future of the Employment Service. Tomorrow we start taking evidence from the Governor and Deputy Governor of the Bank of England on the labour market and employment implications of economic and monetary union.

Despite that work load, we were determined to undertake a joint inquiry with the Social Security Committee into the single work-focused gateway, because it is potentially the most radical step forward in welfare reform and could result in very radical changes to the way in which people experience the welfare system. It seemed proper to combine our expertise on the issue.

However, both Committees are frustrated by the Standing Orders under which we have to operate. At one of our first evidence sessions there were four members of the Social Security Committee, but only two from the Employment Sub-Committee. We had to take evidence not as a joint Committee, but as the Social Security Committee. That meant that the two of us from the Sub-Committee had to sit through the evidence session and were not allowed to ask questions. In the following evidence session there were four members from the Employment Sub-Committee and three from the Social Security Committee, but one was likely to have to leave 15 minutes before the end of the evidence session, so we were obliged to take evidence as the Employment Sub-Committee, and the three from the Social Security Committee were unable to make a contribution to the proceedings.

I appreciate that there may be a danger in reducing the quorum of a Select Committee to two, particularly as the Chairman generally has only the casting vote, which may allow the other members present to drive through whatever they want. However, that need not be a problem because most Select Committee work proceeds on the basis of consensus. It is feasible to reduce the quorum for evidence sessions only, leaving it at three when the Committee is making decisions or considering a draft report.

The predicament that has given rise to the motion is a symptom of a wider challenge for the Select Committee system. As the Government increasingly do business across Departments, the departmental Select Committees will become increasingly ill-suited to the job of scrutinising what the Executive are doing, unless we can also work more effectively across departmental boundaries. Joined-up government requires joined-up scrutiny.

The problem will recur. Any inquiry that Parliament might wish to undertake on the work of the social exclusion unit would involve contributions from the Committees on Home Affairs, Social Security, Health and Employment. The same might be true of scrutinising the work of the women's unit, drugs policies and, arguably, anything that falls within the remit of the Cabinet Office, for which Parliament has no Select Committee.

I welcome the motion, but I urge the Government to consider a wider review of the work and Standing Orders of Select Committees through the Liaison Committee or the Privileges Committee so that we can do our work more effectively and scrutinise the Government's business properly.

8.35

Mr. Tipping: In my opening remarks I made it clear that with increasing cross-departmental co-operation there would be a need for Select Committees to work more closely together. That would necessitate a further look at the Standing Orders. That has been reinforced by hon. Members from both sides. We will look again at the issue.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That, for the remainder of the present Session of Parliament, Standing Order No. 152 (Select Committees related to government departments) shall have effect subject to the following modification in line 48, at the end to add—

'(4A) Notwithstanding paragraphs (2) and (4) above, where more than two committees or sub-committees appointed under this order meet concurrently in accordance with paragraph (4)(e) above, the quorum of each such committee or sub-committee shall be two.'.

PARLIAMENTARY CONTRIBUTORY PENSION FUND

Ordered,

That, in pursuance of section 1(2) of the Parliamentary and other Pensions Act 1987, Mr. Eric Martlew be appointed a Managing Trustee of the Parliamentary Contributory Pension Fund in the room of Paddy Tipping.—*[Mr. Paddy Tipping.]*

DRAFT LOCAL GOVERNMENT (FUNCTIONS AND STANDARDS) BILL

Ordered,

That a Select Committee of eight Members be appointed to join with a committee to be appointed by the Lords to consider the draft Local Government (Functions and Standards) Bill published in the Command Paper entitled Local Leadership, Local Choice (Cm. 4298);

That three be the quorum of the Committee;

That the Committee shall have power—

(i) to send for persons, papers and records;

(ii) to sit notwithstanding any adjournment of the House;

(iii) to report from time to time;

(iv) to appoint specialist advisers;

(v) to adjourn from place to place within the United Kingdom; and

(vi) to communicate to any Select Committee appointed by either House its evidence and any documents of common interest;

That the Committee shall report by 31st July 1999;

That Mr. Peter L. Pike, Mr. Graham Stringer, Ms Margaret Moran, Dr. Alan Whitehead, Mr. Robin Corbett, Sir Paul Beresford, Mr. James Gray and Mr. Paul Burstow be members of the Committee.—*[Mr. Jamieson.]*

PETITION

Conservation and the Environment (Purbeck)

8.36 pm

Mr. Christopher Fraser (Mid-Dorset and North Poole): I am pleased to have the opportunity to present a petition, the signatures for which have been collected by my constituent, Mr. James Selby Bennett, since last Saturday in the Purbeck district council area of my constituency. The petition says:

Purbeck's position is unique due to its contribution to the nation's needs for oil, minerals, tourism and the Army's only tank training centre. Purbeck receives no additional recompense for this contribution. Purbeck is also an area of unusual geography, which in turn produces an environment of extraordinary rarity and fragility. For several decades the need to improve the single dangerous road access to Purbeck has been recognised but has been put off pending a large development which was intended to fund it. Now road access rectification has been prevented by the environmental designation of a small part of the route alongside a railway.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons calls on the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions to

1. achieve a balance between the conservation issues and the safety and environmental damage to the Purbeck community, and

2. ensure that this balance is struck by our own Government and not delegated to the commission of the European Union.

I share my constituents' view that this is a matter to be decided by our British Government. Almost 1,500 signatures have been collected since Saturday in a small area of my constituency.

To lie upon the Table.

Mr. Bill Sutherland

Motion made, and Question proposed, That this House do now adjourn.—*[Mr. Jamieson.]*

8.38 pm

Mr. Iain Duncan Smith (Chingford and Woodford Green): I rise from a slightly unaccustomed position on the Back Benches to raise the case of my constituent, Mr. Sutherland, who was at one time in the service of the police. I do so because I have had no success in having it properly examined by other means. In a sense, this is an action of last resort, so I make no apology for detaining the House. It may be useful to the Minister if I outline some of the main points of the case and then draw some conclusions.

In June 1988, Mr. Sutherland, who was then a police constable, attended a planning committee meeting regarding the application of a Mr. Sam Morris for a toy and leisure centre to be sited opposite Caledonian Road underground station in Islington. He attended as a private resident, as was made clear at the outset. However, the neighbourhood watch co-ordinator was unable to speak, so Mr. Sutherland was asked to comment. He gave the opinion of the local residents, with which he agreed, who were generally against the application. Summing up, the council highlighted the comments made by Mr. Sutherland and the application was refused. It was later reported, incorrectly, in the *Islington Gazette* that Mr. Sutherland had attended as the local policeman and had given the views of the police. That was not the case, as was made clear at the time. Chief Superintendent Alan Moss later wrote to the council's planning committee to explain that the police had no serious objections to the case.

On 2 August 1988, PC Sutherland, as he was then, was made aware that his actions at the planning committee had caused the wrath of his chief superintendent at Holloway, Archie Newlands. Chief Superintendent Newlands informed PC Sutherland that Chief Superintendent Moss was annoyed at his input at the planning meeting and that he should contact Chief Superintendent Moss. Chief Superintendent Newlands humiliated PC Sutherland and treated him in an unnecessarily callous manner, choosing deliberately to misunderstand his presence at that committee. So bad was his treatment of Mr. Sutherland that Superintendent Doug Hopkins, his deputy, subsequently apologised for his behaviour when he left the office.

Later in August, PC Sutherland was contacted by two of Chief Superintendent Newlands's secretaries regarding their concerns that they had received a call from Mr. Morris asking favours of Chief Superintendent Newlands. Mr. Morris wanted a letter sent to Islington borough council with Chief Superintendent Newlands's signature on it. The secretaries asked PC Sutherland to report the matter to the area senior management, which he subsequently did.

As the Minister will recall, or be reminded of in his briefing, that was not long after the Holloway Road incident, which had repercussions on the internal police investigation procedure, so everyone at Holloway was a little sensitive about these matters. PC Sutherland felt that, as a result of the Holloway Road incident, they would be more reactive and responsive to complaints. They were told by senior management that all officers must act with "openness and honesty" at all times if they suspected a fellow officer of wrongdoing. Quite rightly, people feared the repetition of such an incident.

In September 1988, PC Sutherland reported Chief Superintendent Newlands's behaviour and his relationship with Mr. Morris to Assistant Commissioner Geoffrey McLean at New Scotland Yard. He advised that PC Sutherland should not continue his service at Holloway and he was subsequently moved. Commander Ken Merton was put in charge of the inquiry. PC Sutherland was told that the inquiry would take six weeks, but eventually it took just over six months. Commander Merton retired after six weeks and the inquiry was taken over by John Gold Taylor. PC Sutherland was interviewed for three days.

In November 1988, it came to Mr. Sutherland's attention that Chief Superintendent Newlands was being transferred to Brixton in January 1989 with no explanation. On 8 February 1989, PC Sutherland was finally informed that his complaints were unfounded and no further explanation was given. Yet early on in the inquiry, PC Sutherland had been informed that Mr. Morris had denied making any phone calls, whereas it was subsequently found that he had. In addition, PC Sutherland had been told early on that the secretaries, both of whom he had known for a number of years, had substantiated his allegations at the time.

Mr. Sutherland, as he is now, agreed to go along with the investigation because he trusted the system. Now, after all these years and all his attempts to get some redress, he feels tricked and deeply disillusioned with the manner in which he was treated. He says that, with hindsight, he would have serious doubts about going through the same process again. When I discussed the matter with him, he said that although he still maintains that an extra wrong would not put the case right, he feels deeply unhappy that the blame seemed to have been placed on him rather than the person w[illegible]n he alleged had committed a wrongdoing.

Mr. and Mrs. Sutherland had lived in the Holloway area for more than 20 years and Mr. Sutherland had spent some 25 years policing the area. He was highly respected in the area and in the police force and he had been awarded the British Empire Medal for his outstanding contribution of police service to the community. That is hardly the record of someone who was an internal troublemaker or a discredit to the police force. However, when he made the complaint against Chief Superintendent Newlands, he was taken away and sent to a crime prevention branch. In other words, he was treated like a leper.

In contrast, Chief Superintendent Newlands continued to work at Holloway during the first part of the investigation until he was moved. Later, it seems as though nothing was done about his behaviour—nor did he have to comment on it at any time. It is strange that Chief Superintendent Newlands was moved in the middle of the inquiry, despite the fact that apparently no wrongdoing was found to have occurred.

Mr. Sutherland says that, when such an experience happens, it seriously weakens the foundations upon which so much of life is built, particularly in a force as closely knit as the police. It also clearly affects one's self-esteem and self-respect, and he has been made to suffer.

His health has deteriorated dramatically, and he suffers from a serious nervous complaint for which he has been receiving treatment for some time.

Mr. Sutherland said:

"People have always looked up to the Police as a benchmark of what is good and honourable, and rightly so. In my case, that has been destroyed and I, an ex-policeman, would never trust them in future."

That reaction might be expected, but it is one that I would hope the Minister will address.

What is clear is that the internal investigations system did not work, and there are serious questions about whether it would work in future cases similar to that of Mr. Sutherland. Surely the case should not have taken so long and then been dismissed in such an arbitrary way. Mr. Sutherland believes that the manner in which the witnesses were interviewed was biased, and certainly was not open. All the witnesses were serving officers in the Holloway division and at no time was he allowed access to any of them. Mr. Sutherland made the complaint in good faith about the chief superintendent because of information that he was given by the chief superintendent's secretaries. Clearly, he had nothing to gain from such a complaint and, as we have seen, he had everything to lose. Yet he still made the complaint.

Mr. Sutherland believes that some form of independent ombudsman should handle internal complaints. He believes that the police have far too much power to be both judge and jury inside a closed system, without redress for those who have come forward with issues of conscience or with problems that they have seen in the system.

Mr. Sutherland recognises that the introduction of "Right Line"—which allows staff to pass any concerns about a colleague whom they believed might be acting improperly—while encouraging, does not go far enough. Some forces are setting up proactive squads which seek to identify corruption before it comes into the public arena. However, there is more to be done to encourage those who are decent, honourable and honest to come forward without fear of the repercussions that happened to my constituent.

During, and particularly after, the investigation, Mr. Sutherland was shunned by other policemen. It is difficult always to specify how the process works, but I am sure that the Minister would accept that that sort of thing happens in a tight-knit community—particularly if it is encouraged from the top by a nod or a wink, or if there is a general assessment that somebody is a troublemaker.

In the end, Mr. Sutherland was invalided out of the police force, directly as a result of an accident at an athletics track, which Mr. Sutherland believes—I do not intend to cast aspersions on any individual—was not an accident. He believed that it occurred as a result of those in his company at the time taking a view about his previous actions. I am not attempting to make further allegations about individuals.

I raise the matter because I was deeply concerned about this matter some years ago, and I have tried hard to seek redress for Mr. Sutherland. Not once have I had the whisper of an apology or an attempt to reopen the case, to look at it properly, or to ask the questions that should have been asked. Every time, I am told, "It is too long after the event. It is so stupid to open up cases again. We have other, more important, things to do than that."

In conclusion, Mr. Sutherland used to be a policeman, and he used to serve the force and the public with great honesty and decency. Every day, he set about doing what he believed to be right and proper, in line with his duties. In July 1988, he had, for the first and perhaps only time, cause to complain about someone in authority—in this case, his chief superintendent. He is now dead but, due to a variety of issues, Mr. Sutherland was concerned about his actions. Yet he was made to feel as though he should not have made the allegation.

Having raised the issue, far from being applauded for doing what he thought was right, Mr. Sutherland was shunned, ostracised, moved, humiliated and, eventually, forced to leave the police force. His crime was to raise a concern about a senior officer who, he thought, had got too close to somebody outside and was open to the wrong sort of influence in the pursuit of his duty.

When the case was finally examined, the individuals about whom Mr. Sutherland had raised concerns were utterly exonerated, and no comment was made to him about the reasons or about what happened in the inquiry. Perversely, after a series of problems, the man who had had the temerity to raise the matter was eventually invalided out of the police force. To this day, he continues to attempt to get the police to investigate the original charges reasonably and properly or at least to give him a full, open explanation of why his case was dismissed and he was treated as he was.

I hope that the police will have the decency to reopen the case and that the Minister will say that they should. Given all the circumstances surrounding the case, the police would do well to allow my constituent to get redress. On his behalf, I say that it is never any good to try to shoot the messenger. Surely an organisation such as the police force should learn to deal with the message.

My constituent has suffered; his life has changed and it will never be changed back. He has to live with that, and I see no reason why the police should avoid any further investigation. I ask the Minister to put pressure on them.

8.51 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the Home Department (Mr. Mike O'Brien): The hon. Gentleman has set out in some detail his concerns relating to the case of Bill Sutherland, a retired Metropolitan Police officer. As he will know, I am not the regular spokesperson on the Metropolitan police. That task is ably carried out by the Under-Secretary of State for the Home Department, my hon. Friend the Member for Vauxhall (Kate Hoey). I regret to say that she is in Brussels, at a meeting of the Justice and Home Affairs Council. However, I am very happy to respond.

The investigation of internal complaints is an operational matter for the Commissioner of Police of the Metropolis, who has provided me with information about the background to the matter, about the initial inquiry and about the subsequent review in 1995 by Commander Quinn, director of the Metropolitan Police's complaints investigation bureau.

The Commissioner tells me that in July 1988 the then PC William Sutherland made a series of allegations about the management of the Holloway division where he was based, in particular in respect of a Chief Superintendent Newlands, now deceased, and his association with a local business man, Mr. Sam Morris, also now deceased. In all, allegations were made against three serving officers.

[Mr. Mike O'Brien]

As those against whom the allegations were made were of a senior rank, in line with the regulations in force at the time, the then commander of the complaints investigation bureau led the inquiry. As a matter of record, I should remind the hon. Gentleman that in 1988 the Police (Discipline) Regulations 1985 were in force; they have now been superseded by the Police (Conduct) Regulations 1999, although those apply only to complaints made after 1 April 1999.

Because none of the allegations concerned criminal activity, the inquiry was internal and did not require the involvement of officers from an outside force. During the inquiry, which lasted from July 1988 to January 1989, I am told that Mr. Sutherland gave a detailed written statement, and the hon. Gentleman tells me that he was interviewed. A further 18 witnesses were seen, all of whom made written statements to the investigating officer.

The investigation also produced 112 pages of documentary evidence. The records of interview alone amounted to 54 typed pages. I am told that none of the witnesses cited by Mr. Sutherland was able to offer evidence substantiating his allegations. I am also told that the report recommended that no action should be taken against any of the officers named in the allegations.

PC Sutherland was personally advised of the conclusions of the report in February 1989. I know that Mr. Sutherland retired from the Metropolitan police service in 1992. Since his retirement, Mr. Sutherland has corresponded regularly with Members of Parliament and with senior officers in the Metropolitan police about his concerns and allegations and about what he considers to be the unsatisfactory internal investigations procedures within the Metropolitan police.

I am aware of the on-going correspondence on this matter. I know that the hon. Gentleman has received replies from both Commander Quinn and, in 1996, from the then Deputy Commissioner stating that a further review had been carried out and they were both satisfied that the correct procedures had been followed.

I understand that Mr. Sutherland also made further allegations—although not directly related to the original inquiry—about what he believed amounted to malicious acts against him. The Commissioner has advised me that a full explanation was offered to Mr. Sutherland rejecting each of the allegations as unsubstantiated. I have raised the inquiry again with the Metropolitan police, who have confirmed that they are content that the procedures followed in the initial inquiry complied fully with the regulations in force at the time, and that they have no reason to doubt the conclusions that were reached. Of course, if the hon. Gentleman or Mr. Sutherland have any material that they believe is new and of a significant nature and they wish to give it to me, I will be happy to pass it to the Commissioner for his consideration.

It is not for me to comment on the allegations themselves. Those matters are properly for the investigating officer to consider. However, we must recognise the importance of ensuring that all police forces—including the Metropolitan police, for which the Home Secretary is the police authority—are properly equipped to deal with allegations of impropriety, as well as other general complaints.

It is, of course, important for the Metropolitan police to satisfy themselves today—in a new climate, to which the hon. Gentleman alluded—about how Mr. Sutherland's claims were investigated. They have reported to me that they are confident that the conclusions of the inquiry report are both fair and accurate. I know, too, that the Metropolitan police take very seriously any allegations of wrongdoing by any of their officers, whether they are made by the general public, fellow officers or by civilians.

I remind the hon. Gentleman that, in his annual policing report for 1999–2000, the Commissioner is uncompromising when it comes to integrity:

"Integrity lies at the very heart of policing and it is essential to build and maintain trust within the MPS and with Londoners."

I agree with that, but it is a matter of ensuring that that promise is delivered.

The Commissioner has publicly expressed his determination to tackle corruption in the Metropolitan police. In recent years, the Metropolitan police have deployed sophisticated methods to investigate corruption and the Metropolitan police's complaints investigation bureau—CIB—created a new branch, CIB3, whose purpose is to investigate allegations of serious corruption.

In December 1998, the Commissioner launched the Met's corruption and dishonesty prevention strategy, which aims to ensure that there is no hiding place for those who are dishonest or unethical. One aspect of this is the "Right Line", a confidential telephone line for any members of staff who wish to report concerns about corrupt, dishonest or unethical behaviour in a confidential and secure way. This is administered by CIB's intelligence cell. It is publicised by a poster campaign and an advertisement in the internal police newspaper *The Job*. I welcome the Commissioner's commitment to ridding the Metropolitan police of corruption. I fully support him in those efforts, as I support every other force that is actively seeking to tackle corruption.

I would also like to say a few words about the conduct of internal investigations. It is the Government's policy that internal investigations should be conducted fairly, impartially and thoroughly. Today, detailed procedures exist for internal police investigations that provide safeguards for the thoroughness of the investigation and for officers under investigation.

The procedures are set out in the "Guidance to Chief Officers on Complaints and Discipline" and, from April 1999, in the detailed "Guidance on Police Unsatisfactory Performance, Complaints and Misconduct Procedures". The procedures are designed to accord with the principles of natural justice and the basic principles of fairness. In particular, the guidance on internal investigations is designed to ensure proper investigation of the matter in question, as well as to be fair to officers under investigation.

Mr. Duncan Smith: Does not the hon. Gentleman agree—this point was made by Mr. Sutherland—that unless officers believe that their complaint will be not only treated in confidence but investigated by somebody who is beyond reproach and utterly impartial, they will feel that they dare not make a complaint for fear of the consequences that Mr. Sutherland and others reaped in similar cases? Is not that assurance still missing from the procedures?

Mr. O'Brien: The hon. Gentleman is right to say that we need to ensure confidence in the conduct

of investigations. I shall certainly pass on to the Commissioner the points that he has made about independence, but the Commissioner and the Home Secretary are satisfied that the conduct of investigations, certainly under the new procedures that have just been introduced, will be satisfactory and will win confidence.

In addition to those principles, investigations should be completed as soon as practicable and the investigating officer should ensure that the officer under investigation—and the complainant, if applicable—is kept informed of the progress of the investigation, particularly if there is delay. We certainly want to ensure that where there are long delays and those involved are concerned about the reasons for those delays, an explanation is given.

Mr. Duncan Smith: I realise that this is not the hon. Gentleman's brief, but will he do one more thing for me and ask the Metropolitan Commissioner and anybody else who is involved whether, given the new attitude that exists, they would be prepared to reconsider the case once more in a positive light?

Mr. O'Brien: I shall certainly pass on the hon. Gentleman's comments to the Commissioner. I must, however, remind him that a succession of senior officers in the Met have, over a period of 11 years, considered the allegations made by Mr. Sutherland. In no instance has any of those allegations been found to be substantiated. The senior officers have repeatedly examined the papers and they have not concluded that they could take any further action on that matter.

It is important that the investigating officer who is responsible for the inquiry ensures that it is carried out as impartially, confidentially and properly as possible. The investigation of all internal allegations is rightly a management responsibility for the chief officer of the force concerned. Chief officers share the concern to identify and deal with officers who have been accused of abusing their positions, particularly if there is evidence that they have done so.

I am sorry to hear of Mr. Sutherland's disillusionment and his significant health problems and worries, which have arisen partly from his deep concern about these matters. The hon. Gentleman has said that the debate was in many ways a last resort. Bearing in mind what I have said about passing on some of his comments to the Commissioner, the hon. Gentleman can tell his constituent that by raising this matter, he has done all that can be done. I regret that I am not in a position—nor is the Home Office and, I am told, nor is the Commissioner—to help his constituent any further. It is time to say that very clearly to the hon. Gentleman's constituent.

The hon. Gentleman, as any hon. Member should, has raised the matter properly and argued his case. The debate was, as he said, an action of last resort; the response is the one that I have given. I am told by the Commissioner that he cannot take this matter further. Nevertheless, as the hon. Gentleman requests, I shall pass his comments on to the Commissioner.

Question put and agreed to.

Adjourned accordingly at five minutes past Nine o'clock.

House of Commons

Tuesday 8 June 1999

The House met at half-past Two o'clock

PRAYERS

[MADAM SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

Oral Answers to Questions

HEALTH

The Secretary of State was asked—

Royal Surrey Hospital

1. **Mr. Nick St. Aubyn** (Guildford): If he will make a statement on the quality of service at the Royal Surrey hospital. [84996]

The Minister of State, Department of Health (Mr. John Denham): It is the responsibility of management and doctors to ensure the quality of services provided locally.

Patients and general practitioners have a right to know that their local health service hospital is performing well. As a first step, we will be publishing hospital-based indicators shortly. On 28 May, it was announced that the Royal Surrey hospital would receive £276,000 from the accident and emergency modernisation fund to enable it to open up a medical admissions unit. The unit will reduce the need for patients to stay overnight in the accident and emergency department.

Mr. St. Aubyn: That contribution is welcome, but waiting lists at the Royal Surrey hospital are still higher than two years ago; the turnover of nursing staff has reached 28 per cent; and 20 per cent. of nursing staff places are currently unfilled. Since the abolition of the internal market, there has been a recurring deficit at the Royal Surrey of £1.4 million a year, which led to the closure last Saturday of one of the clinical wards. In the circumstances, when will the Government give the funding that the Royal Surrey needs to maintain the high standards that it has achieved in the past?

Mr. Denham: The truth is that the health authority has received 2.9 per cent. in real growth this year, and more than £800,000 extra will be available from the modernisation fund to tackle waiting lists. The Royal Surrey hospital has met and will meet its waiting list targets, and it will treat more patients than ever next year.

Miss Ann Widdecombe (Maidstone and The Weald): Is the hon. Gentleman aware that 58 per cent. of junior doctors at the Royal Surrey hospital are working more hours than are specified under the new deal?

Mr. Denham: The Government have made progress in implementing the new deal by improving the conditions for rest periods. We will continue to make progress, working with the junior doctors.

Miss Widdecombe: How does the hon. Gentleman match that statement with the national figures, which show that whereas only 16 per cent. of junior doctors were working beyond the 56-hour limit when we left office, some 28 per cent. are now working beyond that limit?

Mr. Denham: Because, as the right hon. Lady knows, the figures would show continued progress by the Government if they were seen on a comparable basis. We agreed with the junior doctors that there should be more stringent criteria for their rest periods, as that was in their interests and those of patients. Everyone accepted that bringing in the changes in December would produce a rise in the headline figures for non-compliance with the new deal. However, all the evidence suggests that the actual number of hours worked by junior doctors has not increased.

Miss Widdecombe: The figures for the Royal Surrey hospital fly in the face of what the hon. Gentleman has just said. At 31 March 1998, all 128 posts at the Royal Surrey hospital were declared to be compliant. By 30 September 1998—before the new monitoring criteria were imposed—12 per cent. of posts were not compliant with the hours in the new deal. That shows that the trend of increasing non-compliance started before the hon. Gentleman and the Secretary of State changed the criteria. When will we see the national figures which, mysteriously, are available, but have not been published?

Mr. Denham: The answer is the one that I have already given. The reason for the increase in the headline figure for non-compliance is the change in the definitions in the new deal. However, progress continues to be made, and there is no evidence that junior doctors are working longer hours. So far as any individual hospital is concerned, it is clearly the responsibility of the hospital management to work towards compliance with the new deal. One of the reasons why we are continuing to fund the regional task forces is to work with that minority of hospitals which have a minority of junior doctor places that are not compliant with the new deal.

Mrs. Virginia Bottomley (South–West Surrey): In my 15 years as a local Member of Parliament, there has not been a more severe situation at the Royal Surrey hospital. I would like to help the hon. Gentleman to help the hospital to make difficult decisions, but the options that it is now considering are not fair to patients. The area has one of the highest costs of living, high expectations and massive demand. The combination of the hon. Gentleman's decisions on health funding—among the lowest in the country—and the vindictive social services settlement means that the hospital cannot maintain the quality of service that is necessary. Will he personally look at the health and social services figures together?

Mr. Denham: It is an inescapable fact that the health service in the area has to deal with the deficit of about £18 million built up over two years under the previous Administration. Viewed nationally, the hospital is not typical. There has been considerable progress since we came to office in reducing the number of NHS trusts in serious financial difficulties.

Sexual Health (Women)

2. **Fiona Mactaggart** (Slough): What action he is taking to improve the sexual health of young women in Britain. [84997]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health (Mr. John Hutton): My right hon. Friend the Minister for Public Health announced on 23 March that the Department of Health will, over the coming year, develop a comprehensive strategy on sexual health. We expect to be in a position to announce in the very near future the membership of an expert group to steer the work.

Fiona Mactaggart: Does my hon. Friend share my concern about sexual ill-health among young women and the rate of chlamydia—a non-symptomatic sexually transmitted infection, most common among women between 16 and 19—with 630 cases per 100,000 women? Is he aware that research suggests that an integrated specialist service can ensure that young women are more likely to be tested for such infections, to be diagnosed and to avoid problems such as infertility and ectopic pregnancy in later life? Will he do more to ensure that specialist services not only focus on reproductive health but deal with sexually transmitted infections in an integrated way?

Mr. Hutton: My hon. Friend is certainly right to draw attention to the risks posed by chlamydia. The rate of infection rose significantly in the last year for which we have figures, with an increase of nearly 21 per cent. Nearly 22,500 young women were diagnosed with chlamydia infection. That is why the Department is trying to promote better awareness. We mounted two public awareness campaigns, targeted primarily at younger women. A booklet was issued through *19* magazine in March and distributed through further education colleges. We are expecting two pilot schemes—one in the Wirral and one in Portsmouth—to begin operating a chlamydia screening service for young women in the summer. The Government are taking action and I certainly recognise the strength of my hon. Friend's argument.

Mr. John Bercow (Buckingham): I accept that constructive sex education in schools can safeguard and even improve the sexual health of young women, but does the Minister agree that the recent suggestion from the hon. Member for Oxford, West and Abingdon (Dr. Harris) that sex education should be available in schools to children of seven is wrong and will rightly be viewed with alarm by millions of people throughout the country?

Mr. Hutton: I appreciate the hon. Gentleman's constructive comments about the importance of good health and sex education in schools. It is compulsory in secondary schools, and has been since 1994; at present, it is at the discretion of school governors in primary schools. I do not want to get involved in that argument today. It is important to recognise what good sex education can contribute. Of course it has to be appropriate to make a good contribution to promoting the sexual health of our young people. The Government are committed to that and we are taking the action that I have already outlined.

Ms Beverley Hughes (Stretford and Urmston): Is my hon. Friend aware of recent research reported in the *British Medical Journal*, concluding that teenage sexual health in Britain is not only bad but getting worse, with increases in terminations among the under-19s and in birth rates? In the context of a fall in cases of sexually transmitted diseases generally, we have had an increase in cases not only of chlamydia but of gonorrhoea among the young. Does he agree that, although sex education and contraception are essential parts of the strategy, they are by no means sufficient by themselves and we must tackle issues of social exclusion, education, parental involvement and indeed poverty?

Mr. Hutton: I agree strongly. My hon. Friend made several sensible and useful points. It is very much the Government's intention to approach these issues in a joined-up way, considering all the services that are available to young women. It is extremely important to improve the sexual health of our young people. We have the highest rate of teenage pregnancy in western Europe and very high rates of sexual infection among young people. That is not acceptable. The Government will address the issues and we are determined to improve the sexual health of our young people.

Dr. Evan Harris (Oxford, West and Abingdon): In view of that answer, does the Minister accept the need for urgency and does he understand the concerns of the British Medical Association, the Royal College of Nursing and the Sex Education Forum about the initiative that he announced a minute ago? We are halfway through this Parliament and we are still awaiting the joint report from the Department of Health and the Department for Education and Employment on personal health and sex education and the report of the social exclusion unit on teenage pregnancy. I urge the Minister to consider becoming involved in the debate on sex education so that we can have a system, such as those in Scandinavia and Holland, of early, clear sex education which has delivered the lowest rates of teenage abortion and under-16 conception in Europe, instead of the highest, which we have.

Mr. Hutton: I welcome the hon. Gentleman's interest and concern, but I shall not take any lectures from him about the speed of the Government's response. We have responded quickly and are putting together a comprehensive strategy to address such issues in the near future. It is a clear priority for the Government to tackle them as quickly as we can, but that must be done in the right way. We have the elements of the strategy in place and that will make a significant contribution to improving the sexual health of young people in this country, which is what we want to do.

Cervical Screening

3. **Laura Moffatt** (Crawley): What plans he has to increase public confidence in cervical screening for women. [84998]

The Secretary of State for Health (Mr. Frank Dobson): It is vital that women have confidence in the cervical cancer screening system to identify early signs of abnormalities or to provide reassurance that none are present. The only way to increase such confidence is to provide services that justify it. That is why I announced

in December 1997 stringent new quality assurance arrangements to apply to all cancer screening services. This involves setting high standards, outside monitoring of those standards and external accreditation of the laboratories involved.

Laura Moffatt: I thank my right hon. Friend for that answer. I welcome the new targets and innovative methods for getting women to accept that screening is the best way to ensure that they maintain their good health. Is he aware that some commentators seek to undermine screening and suggest that it is somehow an invasive and nasty procedure that the medical profession do to women? Does he agree that screening is a partnership between women and health workers and that better methods of increasing take-up of screening will increase the numbers of women who survive—some 1,300 a year currently—and who would not do so without screening?

Mr. Dobson: Certainly I accept the points that my hon. Friend makes. The new arrangements will raise standards, although no screening system can be 100 per cent. accurate. Our present system saves the lives of more than 1,300 women every year, and mortality rates from cervical cancer have fallen year on year. We are drawing up plans for a national publicity campaign to increase public understanding and confidence in the NHS cervical screening programme.

Miss Julie Kirkbride (Bromsgrove): I was interested in the Secretary of State's response to the last question, but many women still die every year from cervical cancer despite the undoubted success of the national screening programme. What interest is his Department showing in the potential of a new technology to assist in the treatment of the disease? A company called Digene has a new product that could screen with an almost 100 per cent. success record according to the trials that have taken place so far. Will the right hon. Gentleman set up a pilot scheme to discover whether the product is as effective as it appears and, therefore, potentially save the lives of the many women who still die from that entirely treatable disease?

Mr. Dobson: My interest in cervical cancer screening did not commence when I became Secretary of State for Health. When I was the shadow health Minister more than a decade ago, I put together the first comprehensive report on screening call and recall schemes, which the then Government could not be bothered to do.

Since then, the system has been put in place. I have been pressing the various organisations involved and talking to the Cancer Research Campaign about new ways in which to carry out screening. It has always seemed to me that a change discernible to the human eye through a microscope must be the result of a chemical change. I understand that that approach is being pursued, although the necessary tests are being carried out largely in the United States.

I hope that that approach is successful. If so, it will improve the accuracy of screening, but it will not make it 100 per cent. accurate.

Mr. Simon Hughes (Southwark, North and Bermondsey): I am sure that the Secretary of State wants this country to have the best cancer screening processes and to succeed in bringing down our cancer death rate, which is far worse than in many parts of Europe. Does he agree that that will require the best processes, technology and education system, and that we have all the necessary staff—nurses, doctors, consultants, and other professionals?

When will the Government announce that their policy for the health service will mirror their general election policy for the education service? Such an announcement would mean that, over this Parliament, the amount of our national wealth, as a proportion of national income, that is spent on our national health would increase. When will we begin to spend on our health service the same amount as most of our European neighbours spend on theirs?

Mr. Dobson: Rather than joining in the vague theorising that Liberal Democrat Members go in for because they will never be within a sniff of being in power, I shall address the point that the hon. Gentleman raises in relation to the amount that is paid to people working in the cervical cancer screening system. We have offered pay increases of between 6 and 26 per cent. to those who train cytoscreeners. To qualified cytoscreeners, we have offered an increase of 11 per cent. That reflects the difficulty of recruitment, the poor levels of pay that they have received in recent years, and the importance of their work, which is very demanding and which, up to now, has been badly paid.

Teenage Pregnancies

4. **Dr. Jenny Tonge** (Richmond Park): When he expects to publish the report of the social exclusion unit on teenage pregnancies. [84999]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health (Mr. John Hutton): The social exclusion unit will be publishing its report very shortly.

Dr. Tonge: I thank the Minister for that welcome reply, although I wonder what the word "shortly" means. Does he share my shame that this country has the highest rate of teenage pregnancy in Europe? Does he connect that in any way with the reduction in the number of family planning clinics and the very poor quality of sex education over the past 18 years?

Does the hon. Gentleman also recall that there was no mention of teenagers' sexual health or of teenage pregnancies in the Green Paper "Our Healthier Nation"? We have waited longer than two years for the social exclusion unit report, and it will be at least another year before the report on teenagers' sexual health is ready. When will we see some action?

Mr. Hutton: In my earlier response to my hon. Friend the Member for Stretford and Urmston (Ms Hughes), I described those areas in which the Government are already taking action to deal with some of the problems arising from sexual health and pregnancies among teenagers. The hon. Lady is usually right, but she was wrong to say that we have waited two years for the social exclusion unit report. My right hon. Friend the Prime Minister commissioned that report last July, and we expect it to be published very soon.

However, I agree that action needs to be taken to reduce teenage pregnancies, which are four times more common here than in France, and six times more common than in the Netherlands. That is not acceptable, as a consequence of teenage pregnancies is social exclusion at a crucial time in young women's lives. The Government are taking action. We have announced the formation of a national comprehensive strategy, led by an expert task group, whose composition will be announced shortly. The Government are committed to taking action, and are doing so.

Mr. John Healey (Wentworth): Before finalising his plans for reducing teenage pregnancies, would my hon. Friend encourage health authorities to consider the lessons learned in pioneering baby-doll projects run in Rawmarsh and Wath-upon-Dearne? Fourteen-year-olds are given life-like dolls to look after, and the dolls wake at night, scream, feed and much more. Half those who took part in the projects said that the age at which they would wish to have children was a lot higher than it had been beforehand. Will my hon. Friend congratulate the Rotherham youth workers, Karen Kirby, Ann Brown, Pat Hickling and Sue White, on pioneering the projects?

Mr. Hutton: I am happy to endorse what my hon. Friend has said about that work. The experience of young children to which he has referred was certainly my own experience when I first became a father. My hon. Friend confirms that action is already being taken up and down the country. Many health action zones are doing pioneering work to develop new approaches to tackling teenage pregnancy. We support that work, and we want to spread best practice around the country.

Aricept

5. **Dr. Vincent Cable** (Twickenham): If he will make a statement on *(a)* the level of take-up and *(b)* regional disparities in the take-up of Aricept in the NHS. [85000]

The Minister of State, Department of Health (Mr. John Denham): Donepezil hydrochloride—Aricept—was prescribed by general practitioners in the national health service in all health authorities in England over the 12-month period ending March 1999. At a regional level, the number of prescriptions per 100,000 population aged 60 years and over varied from 58 in west midlands to 339 in Trent, with an average of 170 for each region.

Dr. Cable: I thank the Minister, but does he agree that those figures demonstrate the enormous regional disparity that is already clear to many patients and their carers? In some areas, prescriptions are freely available, but in others, patients can obtain them only at the considerable cost of around £150 a month. In view of the growing clinical evidence of the benefits of the drug and of the enormous help it gives victims and carers, does the Minister accept that the drug should be included in the first round of drugs appraised by the National Institute for Clinical Excellence?

Mr. Denham: Two important points must be made. First, Aricept, which is licensed for treatment of mild to moderate Alzheimer's disease, is a symptomatic treatment, and there is no evidence that it affects the progression of the underlying disease. Secondly, I am advised that it has not been widely prescribed to date because of concern that the moderate improvements it brings in cognitive function tests may not necessarily translate into worthwhile clinical and social benefits. The variation in the figures that I have given probably reflects differing attitudes among specialists to use of the drug. Research projects are under way, and a large trial organised by the NHS in the west midlands is covering 3,000 patients. In addition, it is likely that NICE will at some point be asked to consider drugs for the treatment of Alzheimer's disease.

Mr. Alan Duncan (Rutland and Melton): NICE may attempt to iron out regional disparities in the availability of drugs such as Aricept, but has not its chairman, Professor Rawlins, already admitted that he will rule out advocating the use of drugs that NICE considers to be too expensive, even if they are highly clinically effective? Can the Minister name just one respectable organisation prepared to support his absurd claim that there is no rationing in our national health service?

Mr. Denham: Clinicians in the NHS want NICE to offer consistent guidance on the clinical effectiveness and cost effectiveness of treatments. There has been wide support from a variety of professional bodies for the establishment of the National Institute for Clinical Excellence precisely because people know that such guidance will be made available.

Smoking

6. **Ms Gisela Stuart** (Birmingham, Edgbaston): What guidance has been issued to the NHS about developing smoking cessation services. [85001]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health (Mr. John Hutton): Guidance was issued on 16 April 1999 to the NHS on the development of new NHS smoking cessation services. Up to £60 million will be available over the next three years, initially in health action zones, to develop these new services.

Ms Stuart: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for that answer. Birmingham health authority leads the field in smoking reduction. Recently, about 110,000 free guides to a smoke-free Birmingham were delivered to C2, D and E households. In his reply, the Minister said that extra money is to go to health action zones. Will he say whether, in future, money will go to authorities such as Birmingham, which are not health action zones but which nevertheless lead the field in that area, to support their good work?

Mr. Hutton: Again, I am happy to join my hon. Friend in supporting the excellent work that is done in Birmingham. The smoke-free Birmingham campaign is an excellent model for other partners to explore. The first year of the new three-year programme of promoting smoking cessation services will be focused on health action zones, but in years two and three we expect the benefits to be spread more widely throughout England. We expect £20 million to be spent in year two and £30 million the year after, throughout the country.

HIV

7. **Mr. Peter Brooke** (Cities of London and Westminster): How he will ensure that health authorities use the HIV prevention special allocation in ways appropriate to the epidemiology of HIV. [85003]

The Secretary of State for Health (Mr. Frank Dobson): The forthcoming guidance to health authorities on the use of HIV and AIDS special allocations will emphasise the need to match funding of prevention initiatives to the local situation and highlights the target groups identified in the current HIV health promotion strategy.

Mr. Brooke: Can the Secretary of State confirm that HIV-AIDS strategy will strengthen targeting work with the three communities that the all-party hearings last summer regarded as most at risk—first, gay and bisexual men, secondly, African people and, thirdly, injecting drug users—if that analysis was correct?

Mr. Dobson: I can confirm to the right hon. Gentleman that we want to target the effort and we want people in the national health service to target in particular those three groups that are most at risk. However, we do not want to concentrate all the effort exclusively on them because we need to ensure that groups that are near the boundary are also properly covered and protected. That is the way that we can stop AIDS spreading among groups of people who are not at present particularly susceptible.

Mr. Neil Gerrard (Walthamstow): Given that there are about 2,500 new infections of HIV a year and that the Public Health Laboratory Service Board still states that HIV is the most important communicable disease in the country, as well as advising health authorities, will my right hon. Friend consider what can be done to strengthen monitoring systems so that we regularly get meaningful and consistent data on how each health authority is spending and using money to target those people who are most at risk?

Mr. Dobson: I do not know whether I am disclosing things that I should not disclose, but I have been spending considerable time with my officials to try to ensure that what my hon. Friend asks for is done.

Maternity Units

8. **Mr. Andy King** (Rugby and Kenilworth): What research he has *(a)* commissioned and *(b)* evaluated on the feasibility of midwifery–led maternity units. [85004]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health (Mr. John Hutton): The NHS research and development programme is funding two relevant studies, "Re-designing postnatal care: a randomised controlled trial of protocol based midwifery-led care", and the "Extension of an established clinical data set to address the effect of structural variables on the process and outcomes of United Kingdom maternity units". In addition, evaluation of the midwifery-led unit at the Royal Bournemouth hospital has been funded by Dorset health authority and evaluation of the Edgware birth centre has been commissioned by Barnet health authority.

Mr. King: I thank my hon. Friend for that reply. I am sure that he would wish to join me in congratulating Warwickshire health authority on the positive work that it is undertaking to re-evaluate the way in which maternity services are delivered throughout the county. I hope that my hon. Friend will also join me in supporting the authority's continued research into bringing about a pilot midwifery-led unit at the Hospital of St. Cross in Rugby.

Mr. Hutton: I certainly pay tribute to my hon. Friend on his campaign to promote and defend maternity services in his constituency. He may be aware that Warwickshire health authority has been carrying out a survey of women's views of maternity services throughout the county. As a result, the authority will be reconsidering the future configuration of maternity services in Rugby taking into account the views of local women and health professionals.

Mr. Philip Hammond (Runnymede and Weybridge): Midwives do a wonderful job, in which we all want to encourage and support them, but does the hon. Gentleman acknowledge that there is a need for a consultant presence to deal with problem cases? Does he share the concerns of the confidential inquiry into stillbirths and deaths in infancy about the lack of consultant input in such cases? Will he confirm that by 2001, each year, 500 specialists in obstetrics and gynaecology will be chasing only 50 consultant posts, and that as a result, many of them will leave the national health service? Is it not a scandal that those expensively trained, badly needed doctors are being thrown on the scrap heap because the Government will not fund the necessary NHS consultant posts?

Mr. Hutton: I can accept very little of that. The hon. Gentleman usually has something sensible to say, but I am afraid that today he did not. Research evaluating midwifery-led maternity services has been generally positive about their contribution. My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State recently asked a multi-disciplinary working party, including the Royal College of Obstetricians and Gynaecologists, the Royal College of Midwives and others, to develop criteria for ensuring that small maternity units, including those that provide a midwife-led service, can avoid closure while maintaining patient safety. I reject fundamentally the hon. Gentleman's attack on midwifery. The Government are committed to developing good-quality midwifery and maternity services, and that is what we will do.

Mr. David Drew (Stroud): Will my hon. Friend bear in mind how important midwife-led services are in rural areas, where they add greatly to choice? Will he note the importance of general practitioners, who can make or break such units? Will he encourage the health service to talk to GPs to ensure that they are aware of their benefits?

Mr. Hutton: I agree with my hon. Friend. The Government remain fully committed to the principles of woman-centred maternity services that offer women greater choice, continuity of care and control. We will bear my hon. Friend's comments in mind.

Breast Cancer

9. **Mr. Andrew George** (St. Ives): What assessment he has made of the influence of diet and environmental factors on the incidence of breast cancer. [85005]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health (Mr. John Hutton): The causation of most breast cancers is complex and has not been established but may involve several dietary, hormonal, environmental and hereditary factors. The influence of diet and nutrition on the incidence of breast cancer was considered by the Committee on Medical Aspects of Food and Nutrition Policy in the 1998 report "Nutritional Aspects of the Development of Cancer", a copy of which is in the Library.

Mr. George: I thank the Minister for that helpful reply. While it is of course necessary to co-ordinate proper screening, detection and treatment of breast cancer, does he agree that understanding the causes is as important—possibly more so—in the long run? Some companies produce arguably carcinogenic agrochemicals while making vast profits out of breast cancer treatments such as Tamoxifen. Does the hon. Gentleman agree that it is important to give proper priority to research and its dissemination, so that perhaps this country will follow others in banning lindane?

Mr. Hutton: I agree with much of what the hon. Gentleman said. He knows that the Government support a wide variety of research programmes examining this area and others. The Committee on Carcinogenicity of Chemicals in Food, Consumer Products and the Environment recently considered the potential association between organochloride insecticides, which I think are the hon. Gentleman's concern, and breast cancer. I expect that it will prepare a draft statement at its June meeting, which should be available for publication early in July.

Miss Melanie Johnson (Welwyn Hatfield): Does my hon. Friend share my concern about the importance of improving and modernising the equipment available for the detection of breast cancer? I believe that £100 million of lottery money will be made available for that. When, and on what projects will it be spent?

Mr. Hutton: I strongly agree with what my hon. Friend says; it is important that new investment goes into improving cancer services. The sum of more than £100 million from the new opportunities fund will make a most significant contribution to doing that. We expect the first resources to be available during the winter.

Health Trusts Merger (Lincolnshire)

10. **Mr. Edward Leigh** (Gainsborough): If he will make a statement on the proposed merger of health trusts in Lincolnshire. [85006]

The Minister of State, Department of Health (Mr. John Denham): Ministers are currently considering a proposal from NHS Executive Trent to carry out a public consultation on a possible merger of the three Lincolnshire acute trusts: Grantham and District Hospital NHS trust, Lincoln and Louth NHS trust and Pilgrim Health NHS trust.

Mr. Leigh: As he sits in London, does the Minister understand the real fear and concern of rural people that, as these mergers continue, it is the rural hinterlands that will suffer? People from those areas may lose their places on the boards, and small hospitals, such as Gainsborough, will not receive the same level of commitment and energy that they enjoyed when they had their own health trusts.

Mr. Denham: We would never proceed with a merger of trusts unless we were convinced that patient care would benefit as a result. In addition to that overall criterion, we have set down some important tests, one of which is that mergers between NHS trusts would be expected to realise a minimum of £500,000 in bureaucracy savings within the first two years of going ahead. That money would be available for investment in front-line services. Trusts will not be forced to merge; the test is whether they would improve patient care. Clearly, that test must apply for all the patients whom they serve—not merely for some of them.

Private Finance Initiative

12. **Mr. Derek Wyatt** (Sittingbourne and Sheppey): How many private finance initiative community hospital schemes are awaiting decision by his Department. [85009]

The Secretary of State for Health (Mr. Frank Dobson): The private finance initiative scheme for a new community hospital in Sheppey, being taken forward by the Thameslink Gateway NHS trust, is one of a package of PFI schemes being negotiated with one consortium. Difficulties in resolving some of the outstanding issues on the most advanced of those schemes—that for Chichester—has held up progress on all the schemes. I expect the Chichester scheme to reach financial close shortly. I am sure that my hon. Friend will be pleased with that, because it should mean that, within the next two months, the trust in his area will know whether it has a viable scheme to build the much-needed community hospital in Sheppey.

Mr. Wyatt: I thank my right hon. Friend for that reply—although he has stolen some of my thunder. That particular PFI scheme on the Isle of Sheppey has been going for three and a half years and £1 million has been spent so far on legal fees for a scheme costing only £10 million. What my constituents are most concerned about is that, if the scheme does not go ahead, we will not have a hospital. Will my right hon. Friend comment on that matter?

Mr. Dobson: That was one of the innumerable shambles that we inherited from the Conservatives. [HON. MEMBERS: "Come on."] It is no good moaning—it was. It is as simple as that. We have gone a long way towards sorting things out; that is why 12 major PFI hospitals are being built already and there are dozens of smaller schemes. Provided that the Chichester scheme is okay, I expect the Sheppey scheme to go ahead. What is crucial is that, if the scheme cannot be undertaken through the PFI, we shall have to use other methods. The people of Sheppey are entitled to a decent community hospital, and that is what we are determined to provide—one way or another.

Mr. Stephen Dorrell (Charnwood): I am pleased to welcome the fact that the Government are continuing to develop the private finance initiative for hospital

building. May we be precisely clear about the Government's position? Would it be accurate to say that, in relation to the ancillary services of the national health service, the present Government are more effective privatisers of those services than their predecessors? Is that the Secretary of State's position?

Mr. Dobson: No, it is not. Given that, for countless decades, the average cost overrun for major hospital developments was 20 per cent.—so that the NHS got five hospitals for the price of six—the main thing that we are privatising is the cost overruns. Under the PFI, if there are any cost overruns, the private sector will have to meet them—not the taxpayer.

Mrs. Eileen Gordon (Romford): Is my right hon. Friend aware that the delay in the PFI decision on Oldchurch hospital in Romford is causing great anxiety within the community and having an impact on the modernisation of other health service facilities—for example, the overdue reprovision of Warley hospital, which should have been closed years ago? The delay is even having an impact on the local authority's review of leisure facilities in Havering. Are we likely to have a decision soon?

Mr. Dobson: I certainly hope that we shall have a decision soon. However, it has to be said that, until the Labour Government entered office, no decision was taken, even in principle, to go ahead with the new hospital at Oldchurch, so it is no good any of the local Tories moaning—their Government did nothing about the matter for 18 years.

Audit Commission NHS Management Letter

13. **Mr. David Heath** (Somerton and Frome): If he will make it his policy to publish the annual Audit Commission NHS management letter. [85010]

The Minister of State, Department of Health (Mr. John Denham): The Audit Commission does not produce an NHS management letter. However, it does prepare a summary of the findings of its appointed auditors, and the decision on whether to publish that summary is for the Audit Commission. The view of the Department is that publication would duplicate the statutory work of the National Audit Office, which covers similar ground in its annual report to Parliament on the NHS accounts. The NAO report is, of course, published.

Mr. Heath: That is extraordinary. Is the Minister aware that, year after year, members of the Audit Commission asked the previous Secretary of State to allow publication, but that their request was always refused? The current Secretary of State has continued the practice of refusing to allow publication. Is the Minister aware that, at the end of next month, the Audit Commission will produce a package containing the annual report and the management letter—as it is usually described—for local authorities in England, for local authorities in Wales and for the police authorities, but that the one package it cannot publish is the one for the health service, because the Secretary of State will not allow it? Is that freedom of information?

Mr. Denham: I repeat: the decision on whether to publish is for the Audit Commission. However, I do not want to mislead the hon. Gentleman: the Department's view is that the summary is valuable, and one of the reasons for that is that the informal status of the document allows for a degree of subjectivity which is quite helpful. To be frank, if the document were to be published, we would expect to agree the text, and the process of doing that would result in the document losing much of its value and many of the messages being lost.

The hon. Gentleman, who was an Audit Commissioner, will be aware that the NAO audits health accounts and the Audit Commission audits the accounts of local government. That is why it is quite appropriate for the Audit Commission to publish its local government management letter and for the NAO to fulfil the same function in respect of the NHS.

Sir Nicholas Lyell (North–East Bedfordshire): Before either the Audit Commission or the NAO produces its next letter or report, will the Secretary of State ask them to investigate the matter of young doctors' hours, and to take special note of the most serious aspect of the problem, which is young doctors who are on call but working continuously, with the result that they work continuously from 9 am one day to up to 5 pm the next? That is contrary to the Secretary of State's own health circular, so will he ask for a report to ensure that the practice is stopped?

Mr. Denham: As I said earlier, last December we agreed and introduced more stringent criteria for rest periods as part of the new deal. That is evidence of our commitment to work to improve the working conditions of junior doctors, not only because it is in the interest of junior doctors, but because it is in the interest of patients. I shall meet junior doctors to discuss that and other matters later this week.

Midwives (Grading)

14. **Mr. John Randall** (Uxbridge): What plans he has to review the grading of midwives. [85011]

The Secretary of State for Health (Mr. Frank Dobson): In February, we published proposals on modernising the national health service pay system to provide midwives and nurses with a modern career structure to replace the current rigid grading system. The proposals have been generally welcomed and are now the subject of talks with representatives of the staff involved.

Mr. Randall: Is the Secretary of State able to give comfort to those in the profession who are seriously worried that continued recruitment at grade D will only bring further problems with recruitment?

Mr. Dobson: I can try to reassure members of the profession. As I said, our proposals for modernising health service pay are intended to give midwives and nurses a new, modern career structure, with three tiers to replace the current clinical grades, including grade D, and to enable progression within each tier for any individual midwife who takes on particular responsibilities or undertakes courses in professional development.

Hospital Services (East Kent)

15. **Mr. Damian Green** (Ashford): If he will make a statement on the future of hospital services in East Kent. [85012]

The Secretary of State for Health (Mr. Frank Dobson): The future for hospital services in East Kent is bright. On 22 December I ended the years of uncertainty about the future of acute services in Canterbury, Ashford and Thanet. On 1 April a new single NHS trust was established to deliver the necessary changes and improvements, and a new chief executive has been appointed. In this financial year the trust will receive £221 million. It will also receive £2.2 million to be invested in accident and emergency services in East Kent. As the hon. Gentleman represents Ashford, he will be interested to know that a new MRI scanner will come into operation at the William Harvey hospital in Ashford.

Mr. Green: The Secretary of State is aware that the East Kent health authority had a budget deficit of £1.7 million this year and had to consider the option of closing one of the community hospitals in East Kent. As members of the local community health council are sure that the deficits will recur, can the Secretary of State give a guarantee that none of the community hospitals will close over the next few years as a result of such deficits?

Mr. Dobson: When we came to power, the national health service was running a deficit of more than £400 million a year. Last year it was down to about £20 million.

Dr. Stephen Ladyman (South Thanet): When we in East Kent were debating the rationalisation of hospital services, I promised my constituents that, as a result of the change, they would get the best possible standard of care for everyone in East Kent, everywhere in East Kent. The investment announced by my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State shows that he, too, is committed to that. Does he accept, however, that because of the delays in appointing a chief executive to the new combined trust, some of the clinicians in that new trust have started to believe that people are dragging their feet and are not fully committed to implementing his recommendations? Will he ensure that they know that he expects them to get on with the job of implementing those recommendations and improving standards for everyone as quickly as possible?

Mr. Dobson: If the members of the new board can read, they should be perfectly clear that they are expected to implement the changes that were approved, because they were told that by me. I assume, therefore, that the new chief executive, whom they appointed, also understands that that must be the priority. We are determined to ensure that the health services in East Kent are first-rate for everyone in East Kent, not just at individual hospitals. After widespread public consultation and a proper decision, we cannot allow people to think that they can go back on that decision. The uncertainty is over. Progress must now be made.

NHS Trusts

16. **Mr. Nigel Evans** (Ribble Valley): What action he takes to encourage the retention of high-calibre non-executive directors of NHS trusts. [85013]

The Minister of State, Department of Health (Mr. John Denham): If eligible for re-appointment, the best non-executive directors will always be encouraged to re-apply when their term of office is due to end. All appointments are made in accordance with the guidelines of the Commissioner for Public Appointments and the Department's own published procedures for NHS appointments.

Mr. Evans: If it is the policy to retain high-calibre non-executive directors, why did the Secretary of State sack three high-calibre non-executive directors of the Guild Community Health Care NHS trust in Preston? Why is not the Secretary of State answering the question, as he sacked them? What message does that send to non-executive directors throughout the country?

Mr. Denham: We will be discussing this matter at greater length during tonight's Adjournment debate, but I shall briefly give the background. After a series of events—critical reports on the trust, the suspension of the chief executive and the resignation of the chair—my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State concluded that, although he did not apportion any individual blame to non-executive board members for the serious problems that occurred, it was not in the interests of the Guild trust or the NHS for the previous non-executive board members to stay in post. A new chair and a full team of new non-executive board members have now been appointed.

Audrey Wise (Preston): Will my hon. Friend also consider the value of high-calibre chief executive officers such as the chief executive officer in the Guild community trust, whose excellent work included winning the confidence of ethnic minorities and patients' families as well as the creation of unique, award-winning provision for suffers from late-stage Huntington's disease? Less than a year ago, my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State himself put an award into the hands of the chief executive, who has been victimised on the basis of unsubstantiated assertions which are not backed up by evidence.

Mr. Denham: In my view, the proper procedures have been followed and, in respect of the way in which the Guild trust has handled those matters, there has been proper consultation with the regional office. If anything, my hon. Friend's comments reinforce my view that my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State was absolutely right to get a fresh start for the trust so that it can build on its record and provide good patient care in the future.

Sir Sydney Chapman (Chipping Barnet): Does the Minister agree that non-executive directors of NHS trusts ought to be remunerated? If so, does he believe that there is a case for looking at that question, particularly as it is some years since the remuneration was fixed?

Mr. Denham: As the hon. Gentleman suggests, non-executive directors are remunerated, but I am not

aware of any immediate plans to review that remuneration. Across the country, we are able to attract candidates of excellent background and qualities who are willing to serve the NHS in that capacity, and we are grateful to them for that.

Private Health Care (Elderly People)

17. **Helen Jackson** (Sheffield, Hillsborough): What action he is taking to amend the regulation of private health care for the elderly. [85014]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health (Mr. John Hutton): The Government set out their plans for regulating nursing and residential homes, domiciliary care and other social services in the White Paper "Modernising Social Services". We also made a commitment to consider further the regulation of health care and, in fulfilling it, we will shortly be consulting widely on the future regulatory arrangements for private and voluntary health care. Our aim is to establish a modern regulatory structure that will meet the need to protect the public and patients, particularly those who are vulnerable or elderly.

Helen Jackson: I thank my hon. Friend for his answer, but he will be aware that, in Sheffield as elsewhere, there has been a fairly rapid reduction in the number of acute medical care beds in hospitals. There was consternation recently when the Royal Hallamshire hospital proposed the closure of a further 22 acute medical beds for the elderly. Most of those patients will almost certainly go into or under private health care in the future. How will my hon. Friend reassure the public, through regulation, that moving from health service beds to private care beds will lead to absolutely no diminution in the medical and nursing care that they receive?

Mr. Hutton: I can certainly confirm to my hon. Friend that the closure of the 22-bed rehabilitation ward for elderly people in her constituency, about which she is concerned, will not now go ahead, and I am sure that she will be relieved to hear that. She, like me, would agree that it is important that we regulate the private health care sector properly to ensure maximum protection for the public. There is a general consensus that the current regulatory system is out of date; it is unsatisfactory and not particularly independent. For example, it treats private hospitals as nursing homes and does not reflect the increased range and complexity of private sector work.

I can also confirm to my hon. Friend that the national service frameworks will apply equally to the private sector and to NHS hospitals—they are there for the private sector to use. The new arrangements and guidelines that will come from the National Institute for Clinical Excellence will also be available for use, if the private sector so chooses.

Under those new arrangements, we must ensure that patients who use the private sector receive high-quality care. We are determined to do that, and we are consulting widely. We shall listen to all the views that are expressed during the consultation process.

Miss Anne McIntosh (Vale of York): Will the Minister reintroduce tax relief on private health insurance for the elderly?

Mr. Hutton: No.

Kosovo/Cologne European Summit

3.30 pm

The Prime Minister (Mr. Tony Blair): With your permission, Madam Speaker, I should like to make a statement on two subjects: Kosovo and the European Council in Cologne which I attended on 3 and 4 June, accompanied by my right hon. Friends the Foreign Secretary and the Chancellor of the Exchequer. The conclusions of the Council are being placed in the Library of the House.

A large part of the European Council was taken up with the crisis in Kosovo. President Ahtisaari came straight from his mission to Belgrade to brief the Council. The peace plan that President Ahtisaari and the Russian special envoy, Mr. Chernomyrdin, presented to Milosevic was accepted by the Serb Parliament and the Federal Yugoslav Government on 3 June. The plan incorporated all NATO's demands. It provided for the immediate and verifiable end to violence in Kosovo; the withdrawal of all military, police and paramilitary forces according to a rapid timetable; the deployment of an effective international security presence and a civil administration—the document specified that, in any such force, the substantial participation would be that of NATO, and that there would be a unified command and control—and for the force to be authorised to establish a safe environment for the people in Kosovo and to facilitate the safe return of all displaced people and refugees.

So the document presented by President Ahtisaari embodied all the conditions set by the international community: all Serb forces come out; an international force with NATO at its core goes in; and the refugees go home in safety and peace. However, we did not—and do not—take Milosevic's assurance on trust. The Balkans are littered with his broken promises. That is why NATO has insisted all along that the bombing will not stop until a full and verifiable withdrawal of all Serb forces from Kosovo has begun.

To give us the certainty we need about Serb withdrawal, the commander of NATO's forces in Macedonia, General Sir Mike Jackson, met representatives of the Federal Yugoslav military on the border at Blace on 5 and 6 June. Those talks ended early on 7 June after the Yugoslav side repeatedly failed to accept the document put forward by NATO. Instead they tried, among other things, to insist on large numbers of Serb troops remaining. That was and is unacceptable.

However, this morning, the Foreign Secretary and his colleagues from the G8 group of countries completed their work on the text of a Security Council resolution. I can confirm to the House that agreement has now been reached in the G8 on a text that enshrines the Ahtisaari-Chernomyrdin plan and its detailed terms.

The text is strong and clear and meets our requirements. It will now go forward to the Security Council. It comes under chapter VII of the United Nations charter, which means that the resolution will be legally binding on the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia, and it authorises, through its detailed provisions, the use of force to ensure its implementation. It requires, in particular, the withdrawal of all Serb forces from Kosovo, and authorises the deployment of our forces as part of a substantial NATO component in the international security presence, which will have a unified chain of command. The members of the G8 that are also on the Security Council—the United States, Russia, Britain, France and Canada—have agreed that they will co-sponsor the draft.

If we need any reminder of the regime that we are dealing with, let me give the House one account, delivered by a refugee when the United Kingdom Government's war crimes co-ordinator, David Gowan, visited Albanian and Macedonian refugee camps last week.

A professional in his late 30s or early 40s said that he was one of more than 2,000 men picked up by Serb forces in early May in villages south of Pristina. They were separated from their families, beaten and transferred to the prison at Mittrovica. The prisoners were forced into cells and made to stand, shoulder to shoulder, for 24 hours without food, water or access to a lavatory. They were then beaten again, systematically, in the prison.

Yet that refugee still said that he was among the lucky ones. He had witnessed himself summary executions when he was detained at the village of Vushtria, and had heard reports of a mass execution of 103 men in the nearby village of Studime. So when the refugees say that they want to be sure that the Serb troops will go out, and that our troops will go in to guarantee their safety, it is not hard to understand why.

The next step, therefore, will be further military talks to put in place the necessary technical agreement. They are taking place today at Blace. Given the progress on a Security Council resolution, there is no excuse for the Yugoslav authorities to drag their feet again. Provided that the Serbs now, at long last, honour their undertakings and begin a verifiable withdrawal of their forces, NATO bombing can be suspended and the Security Council resolution passed, and the international force can start to be deployed in Kosovo before the end of this week.

It is time, however, that Milosevic realised that the longer he tries to draw this out, the longer and harder his forces will be hit. We have achieved this agreement only by showing total resolve and determination; we shall need to be as resolved and as determined now in implementing it. We are close to having all the elements in place, but until we are certain that Milosevic has embarked on the withdrawal of all his forces, NATO's military action will continue.

We can also now start planning in earnest for the reconstruction of the Balkans to give the peoples of the region the security and prosperity that they need to avoid future wars. The future of these front-line states, many of which I have visited in the past few weeks, should be one of peace and prosperity, not ethnic conflict. The people of a democratic Serbia can also benefit from reconstruction and integration into the mainstream of Europe, but let me be clear: that cannot happen while there is a nationalist dictator in power in Belgrade. Until Milosevic goes, Serbia cannot take its true place in the family of world nations.

Events in Kosovo overshadowed other issues at the European Council, but other important work was done too. The European Council appointed Javier Solana to the new post of Secretary-General of the Council and High Representative for the common foreign and security policy. Mr. Solana is a friend of Britain, and a highly capable operator, as we have seen during the Kosovo crisis. His new appointment will boost the effectiveness and credibility of the common foreign and security policy, and I warmly welcome it.

There was a full discussion of economic policy. The European Council unanimously reaffirmed that sustainable, non-inflationary growth and increased employment required comprehensive structural reforms at European Union and national levels. The message is clear in the broad economic guidelines, which the European Council approved, and in the new European employment pact.

As for the future development of the Union, the European Council took a number of important steps. It heard a strong statement from the President elect of the Commission about his plans for reform of that institution, and the Council pledged its full support for Mr. Prodi's approach to reform. The Council welcomed the new European anti-fraud office, whose establishment was agreed at the ECOFIN Council on 25 May, and which will permit the Union to step up the fight against fraud, corruption and mismanagement. Agreement was reached on the further development of a common European security and defence policy, building on the ideas that we outlined last year, which were warmly endorsed by NATO at its Washington summit in April.

The European Council confirmed that an intergovernmental conference would be called early next year to resolve the issues that were left open at the Amsterdam European Council, which need to be settled before enlargement. The Council also endorsed an initiative by Prime Minister Guterres of Portugal to convene next March, under the Portuguese presidency, a special meeting of the European Council, which will be entirely devoted to economic reform and employment. The initiative is very welcome, and follows the call for such an event at the Anglo-Spanish summit on 10 April. We are making real headway in promoting economic reform in Europe, which—as I have repeatedly said in this House—is essential to ensure sustained growth and the unqualified success of the single currency.

The Council rejected the notion of ending tax competition or of the harmonisation of business and income taxes. Instead, the Council decided, sensibly, that merely harmful tax competition should be avoided; and it actually advocated lower business and labour costs. Unfortunately, although we had the support of 13 of the 14 other member states, we could not reverse the duty free decision taken in 1991 by the previous Government, as they had agreed to its being reversible only if there were unanimity.

At the Council as a whole, therefore, substantial progress was made on economic reform, but, as I said at the outset, it was rightly and understandably dominated by Kosovo. Let us hope that the process begun at this Council and taken forward today at the G8 will come swiftly to a secure and just conclusion, ending the obscenity of ethnic cleansing and obtaining justice at last for the people of Kosovo.

Mr. William Hague (Richmond, Yorks): I concur with the Prime Minister that the outline agreement on Kosovo reached last week is very encouraging, as indeed is some of the further news that he has announced about today's agreement of the G8, and that we must now ensure, through all the difficulties that are bound to arise, that those agreements are implemented in full.

We agree with the Prime Minister that the air campaign must not stop until there is a verifiable withdrawal of Serb forces. On that, the Government have the support of the Opposition, as they do on the announcement of the additional deployment of British troops to the region.

The key test of any agreement is whether all the refugees can return in safety to their homes. That raises a number of questions. First, does the Prime Minister agree that the ground force will have to be effectively NATO led, and that the unified command structure to which he has referred will have to run throughout the whole of Kosovo, to avoid any de facto partition of Kosovo? Will the United Nations resolution achieve that?

Secondly, is the Prime Minister confident that the Kosovo Liberation Army will demilitarise as set out in the agreement? What exactly does demilitarisation mean in that context, and how will it be achieved?

Thirdly, the Rambouillet accords provided for an international meeting, three years after the agreement entered force, to determine the mechanism for a final settlement based at least partly on the will of the people. The provision was excluded from last week's outline agreement. In what way will the views of the Kosovar Albanians be reflected in the determination of the final status of Kosovo?

Both sides of the House agree that there is still an enormous amount to do. We must oversee the refugees' return, and of course we must ensure that the events in Kosovo are not repeated there or elsewhere. Will the Prime Minister elaborate on plans to bring greater stability and peace to the region in the longer term, so that people may enjoy, as he has said, peace and prosperity, instead of ethnic conflict, in the future?

Kosovo was the most pressing issue at Cologne, but many other decisions taken there were important to Britain. Why did the Prime Minister not make the case for the type of Europe that the British public want—a Europe that does less and does it better, and that cleans up its act? When will he stop saying one thing in Britain, and then caving in during negotiations?

Two years ago, the Prime Minister vetoed a proposal on European defence on the grounds that it would weaken the United States's commitment to Europe, and that it was an "ill-judged transplant operation". Why has he now supported a proposal that is effectively the same? Is it not a mistake to create a second defence alliance in Europe, which will overlap with NATO and threaten to undermine the United States commitment to NATO? What is the EU doing proposing an army when it cannot even run an audit system properly?

The Prime Minister has always claimed—he claimed it again today—that he will resist tax harmonisation. However, the communiqué says that

"good progress has been made"

on proposals

"on the taxation of investment income";

that agreement on

"proposals for a Directive on the taxation of savings"

will be reached this year; that work on

"a framework for the taxation of energy"

will continue; and that a further report on "reinforced tax policy co-operation" is being prepared. Why did the Prime Minister agree in Cologne to the most comprehensive plan

[Mr. William Hague]

yet for tax harmonisation? Why, when people in this country want to maintain the veto, did he agree to a communiqué that calls for the extension of qualified majority voting—in other words, a further erosion of the veto?

Finally, can the Prime Minister explain the lamentable summit shenanigans over the single currency? The Prime Minister of Luxembourg said memorably that the

"moment for unfettered panic has not arrived".

Instead, the summit opted for a spot of carefully controlled panic. Statements were issued and then withdrawn. As *The Times* said:

"European leaders . . . bungled an attempt to bolster the ailing euro",

spreading

"confusion through the foreign exchanges, sending the euro tumbling towards fresh record lows".

We read that, from now on, only two people in Europe will be allowed to speak about the single currency—judging from the Prime Minister's European election campaign, he is not privileged to be one of them.

Is it not time that the Government's position at such meetings reflected the views of the people of this country? Is it not time that the Government's priority was to act in the interests of Britain, rather than seeking at every opportunity to go with the flow in Europe? Does the Prime Minister not recognise that most people in this country do not want any more powers transferred from Britain to European institutions? They want their taxes decided in this House, and oppose his plans to scrap the pound. They want to be in Europe, not run by Europe.

The Prime Minister: First, I shall deal with what the right hon. Gentleman said about Kosovo. I thank him for his support. The force must have a NATO core and a unified chain of command. That is clear. There must be no question of a de facto partition of Kosovo.

On the future of the Kosovar Albanians, the Rambouillet accords are specifically mentioned in the resolution. There will have to be discussions about the right future for Kosovo, but in the meantime there will be a civil administration that is internationally guaranteed, and there will be substantial autonomy for the people of Kosovo. I cannot see them having any confidence in rule from Serbia while Milosevic remains in power. That is very clear.

In the longer term, it is essential that we begin work as soon as possible on a regeneration programme for the Balkans, because many of the front-line states—such as Bulgaria, Romania, Macedonia and Albania—have given us support in circumstances of intense internal difficulty. Theirs has been a far more difficult path than that of countries such as ours. It is essential that they should be given their reward for that. We must show them that there is a different path for the future. In some of those front-line states, there are forces that would be happy for their politics to be dominated by ethnic conflict. We have to show that the values of democracy pay off. When we consider how much the international community has spent over the past 10 years on resolving conflict in the Balkans, it is at least worth thinking about how we can make some prudent investment in ensuring that we never have to go and sort out further conflicts. It is important to begin work on that as soon as possible.

On Europe, the right hon. Gentleman did not accurately set out the terms of the agreements that we have entered into. He asked why the agreement on defence is different from that proposed at Amsterdam. The reason is simple: at Amsterdam we were asked to agree to something that would have clashed with NATO. As a result of getting involved, we have ensured that Europe's common defence policy is expressed in terms completely consistent with membership of NATO.

As for qualified majority voting and the veto, we have said that we take a case-by-case view. In some circumstances, qualified majority voting might have been in Britain's interests—I mentioned the example of duty free. The difference between the Conservative party as it used to be and the Conservative party as the right hon. Gentleman has made it is shown by the fact that the biggest extension of qualified majority voting was agreed by the Conservative Government as part of the passage of the Single European Act. It was right that they did that. They did it not because they were betraying the national interest, but because it was in the interest of this country to develop a single market in Europe. That is the choice for this country. Over the past few weeks, the right hon. Gentleman has defined the modern Conservative party by its hostility to Europe.

At the very beginning of his questions, the right hon. Gentleman asked me why I did not go to the European Council and argue the points that he made in his Budapest speech a few weeks ago. In his first question, he asked me for what is effectively a renegotiation of the treaty of Rome and Britain's entry into the European Union. *[Interruption.]* They are nodding away; let us test them. Such a renegotiation requires the consent of the other 14 members of the European Union. Can they name one that supports that proposition?

If the right hon. Gentleman had been in my position, he would have gone to the European Council seeking a renegotiation of Britain's terms of entry into the European Union, and not a single other European country would have supported him. The Conservatives would return this country to precisely that position. We would be without influence, power or any authority in Europe. That is not all, however. They want to cancel the changeover plan for the single currency so that even if we wanted to join, we would be unable to do so, and they would cancel the defence initiative that we have undertaken, even though NATO has now endorsed it. It is also true that many Conservative candidates in the European Parliament will not even join the European Conservative parties.

That is a recipe for complete disaster for this country. There are short-term tactical reasons for going for it, but it is a big, long-term strategic mistake, and the choice for this country on Thursday is leading in Europe or leaving it.

Mr. Donald Anderson (Swansea, East): It now looks as if Kosovo will be seen as a famous victory for international order and justice, but one thing is clear from the conflict: the reputation of my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister and the United Kingdom has been mightily enhanced by the clear leadership that he and other Ministers have given. How does my right hon. Friend propose to reach beyond the Milosevic Government and get the message clearly to the people of the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia that they have no future under Milosevic and that they must have a leader

who is capable of mending fences with the west? How can he ensure that war crime investigators enter Kosovo speedily to ensure that the evidence of war crimes is not destroyed by the barbarians?

The Prime Minister: I thank my hon. Friend for his kind words. I have two things to say. First, it is important, perhaps particularly now, that we do not regard the conflict as having been won in any sense until the refugees go back and are safe. Some people asked why we were less than euphoric last Friday. I will allow myself to feel relieved when it actually happens. We have to watch Milosevic and his games and tricks every single inch of the way. He must be under no illusion whatever that if he starts them up again, our force remains there. He should realise that, and it should give him the incentive that he needs to make sure that this is concluded properly.

I am pleased that the draft resolution makes specific mention of the jurisdiction of the war crimes tribunal. My hon. Friend is absolutely right to say that we have to reach out to democratic forces in Serbia. I know that many people in Serbia bitterly opposed the NATO campaign, even those who are also opposed to Milosevic. However, they must now understand that he has been obliged to accept terms that he could have accepted 10 weeks ago. He has devastated their country, ruined its economy and made it an outcast from the world of nations. It is a proud nation which, in many ways, has a history of which its people can be proud. If they want to regain their place in the community of nations, Milosevic's going is the best way of achieving that.

Mr. Paddy Ashdown (Yeovil): Is it not true that it is not over until it is over on the ground in Kosovo? Until that happens, we must judge President Milosevic not by his words, but by his actions. That means that we must keep up the military pressure—the only language that he understands—and the pressure from the air. Does the Prime Minister agree that that means also continuing to make those preparations that NATO has made more recently for the use of ground troops, if necessary? Despite that, the events of the last week ought to give NATO, the Government and the Prime Minister personally good cause for satisfaction as they are a vindication of the policy that they and he have followed.

Is not the last-minute wrangling and wriggling by Milosevic an attempt to evade three unshakeable principles: first, that all Serb authority must be removed from Kosovo; secondly, that there must be an international force with teeth and with NATO at its core, backed by a Security Council resolution; and thirdly, that the refugees must return in peace, live in freedom and have a future in security?

In the Balkans, the devil lies in the detail, and there are four brief questions that I wish to ask by way of clarification. First, will the Prime Minister confirm that the interim status of Kosovo will be, de facto if not de jure, as an international protectorate or trusteeship? Will he tell us who the sponsor of that will be? Will it be the United Nations, the Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe or the European Union?

Secondly, will the Prime Minister confirm that just as Rambouillet did not exclude self-determination in the long term, nothing in the present agreement excludes it? The agreement may not include it, but it should not exclude it.

Thirdly, does the Prime Minister agree that we must not repeat the mistake made in Bosnia of putting the civil administration in too late? It should go in as early as possible.

Lastly, will the Prime Minister refer back to his own statement, in which he mentioned the experience of the refugees? They will not go back if they see Serb troops. However, small numbers of Serb troops—lightly armed, or maybe unarmed—may be on the borders. Will he reflect on what the refugees will think if they see Serb troops on the borders? Will he consider this as a proposition: that every detachment of Serb troops anywhere in Kosovo should be matched by a detachment of NATO troops who will be there to reassure the refugees and, if necessary, afford them protection?

The Prime Minister: We cannot take anything for granted until the killing stops on the ground in Kosovo. Until the Serb forces are fully withdrawn, all options remain open. The basic principles are that Milosevic's forces go out, the international force goes in and the refugees go back—that is the simple mantra by which we must be guided.

On the right hon. Gentleman's detailed questions, the interim status of Kosovo is as an international civil administration, so it is guaranteed by the entire international community in that sense. We must establish it provisionally, and then put in place the proper democratic mechanisms. Secondly, nothing is excluded in the long term. Thirdly, I agree that the civil administration should go in and get to work as soon as possible. Fourthly, it is important to remember that certain Serb troops may go back in to do certain tasks that need to be done, but they are not going back in to be the guardians of the people in Kosovo. Those envisaged as going back in under the Ahtisaari agreement are fewer in number than those envisaged at Rambouillet.

Mr. Tony Benn (Chesterfield): Will the Prime Minister tell the House when the draft UN resolution will be published? To whom will the international force be accountable—the Security Council or NATO? Have the Russians and the Chinese agreed to support the resolution before the bombing stops? Is the territorial integrity of Yugoslavia endorsed in the resolution? Has the Kosovo Liberation Army agreed to disarm and to be decommissioned? Does the UN resolution require the removal of Milosevic?

Is it not clear that had the matter been taken to the UN with the support of Russia and China weeks or months ago, this solution could have been made possible without the destruction of Yugoslavia, the use of depleted uranium weapons, the pollution of the Danube and indeed the destabilisation of the area? History may not view a NATO that tore up the UN charter in quite the way that my right hon. Friend and his colleagues appear to.

The Prime Minister: The terms of the Security Council resolution are circulating now. I do not know what proper arrangements I should make for its being made available, but whatever I am able to do I will do. Obviously, we want the resolution to be passed as soon as possible. The Russian position on the resolution and the bombing has always been clear, but so has our position: that we must be sure of the verifiable withdrawal of Milosevic's troops before the bombing can be stopped.

[The Prime Minister]

On the territorial integrity of the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia, the current proposition is precisely what was available at Rambouillet and could have been accepted 10 weeks ago. The KLA's agreeing to disarm was also in the Rambouillet agreement. From discussions that I have had with KLA people, I believe that they will abide by what the international community has decreed, but they will of course also want to know that the Serb troops really are out of Kosovo. That is hardly surprising.

No, the removal of Milosevic is not required. We have made it clear that that is not a war aim, but I have also made it clear—and I am sure that this will be the position of the international community—that Serbia cannot be part of international reconstruction and regeneration until he goes and there is a democratic Serbia, because otherwise, for one thing, any money that went in there would simply add to his very large personal wealth rather than going to his people.

The solution was not available weeks ago. If my right hon. Friend is saying that if only we had picked up the phone and called the Russians and the Chinese everyone would have come together and made an agreement and we would not have needed to do all this, I really must ask him to reflect on that and on the lessons of what has happened. We tried for months and months. There were 72 UN resolutions against Milosevic. He will not accept any resolution from anyone unless he knows that the alternative is force. I am afraid to say that that is obvious to most reasonable people at the conclusion of these events.

My right hon. Friend is entirely entitled to take the view that he does, but the choice was either to allow ethnic cleansing to continue unchecked or to do our best to stop it. I do not feel any sense of triumph at what we have achieved, because I know how many people have died and how many lives have been made miserable, but I honestly believe that if we had allowed ethnic cleansing to continue unchecked the consequences would have been far more devastating for people in Kosovo, for Balkan stability, for the world as a whole and the values of civilisation.

Mr. Eric Forth (Bromley and Chislehurst): In which policy areas would the Prime Minister keep the veto?

The Prime Minister: Taxation, for example, and defence, but not in—

Mr. Forth: Is that all?

The Prime Minister: Immigration is another example. There are lots of areas in which I would keep the veto, but I would not take the view of today's Conservative party—a view that it never took in government—which opposes qualified majority voting in any circumstances. That really is not sensible. We could not have got the beef ban lifted on that basis. I ask the right hon. Gentleman, however hostile his party is to Europe today, not to ignore the possibility that it might be in government once more. It should start at some point to get back to a sensible position on Europe.

Mr. Gerald Kaufman (Manchester, Gorton): On European Union issues, will my right hon. Friend circulate in the *Official Report* a list of the matters to which the Leader of the Opposition has objected this afternoon that would be made inevitable by the Single European Act, which his party guillotined through the House of Commons?

On Kosovo, will my right hon. Friend confirm that the Serbs' wrigglings, evasions and attempts—still, at this point—to get out of the agreement come after their Government and their Parliament have assented to it and there have been weeks of bombing and months of negotiation? That being so, can my right hon. Friend speculate on where we would be today if we had adopted not his resolute approach but the view of the appeasers, from whom we have heard this afternoon, that we should have appealed to the better nature of that indicted war criminal?

The Prime Minister: On Kosovo, I agree that it is obvious that Milosevic will evade his responsibilities, even now, if he thinks that our will has weakened. That is why it is important that NATO makes it clear that it stands ready to take action should he try to do so at any point.

In respect of Europe, I think that the speech that the Leader of the Opposition made in Budapest a couple of weeks ago was an important speech on behalf of the Conservative party. It revealed that the Conservatives would renegotiate the terms of entry into the European Union. I asked them earlier but they could not name one Government who agreed with that. I do not believe that they could name one Conservative party, apart from this one, that agrees with that. It would not merely be a policy of complete futility but the most extraordinarily inept way to conduct our foreign policy. It is surely sensible that at long last we understand that we are part of Europe and we should make it work in Britain's interests.

Mr. Peter Brooke (Cities of London and Westminster): Where do matters now stand on the withholding tax?

The Prime Minister: Exactly where I said they stood in the House the week before Whitsun. We will not agree to any tax being imposed on Britain from Brussels and we will not agree to any measures that damage the City of London. What is more, we will succeed in obtaining our objective.

Mr. Tam Dalyell (Linlithgow): Does the Prime Minister have any hard evidence that the KLA would be any more willing to surrender its arms than the IRA?

The Prime Minister: There have been statements from KLA leaders in the past few days saying that they will abide by the will of the international community. Of course, one of the reasons why we have to have a substantial international force in Kosovo is to ensure that that happens. However, given what the Kosovar Albanians have been through, it is hardly surprising if people there are resisting by force. It is necessary that we, through the international military presence, ensure that we can bring about a proper civil administration in Kosovo so that the rule of law is once again upheld and people are not terrorised on the basis of their ethnic background. In other words, those things that have characterised Milosevic's rule in Kosovo must be brought to an end.

Mr. Martin Bell (Tatton): Does the Prime Minister believe that the present British troop commitment in the

Kosovo area can be sustained in the long term without the raising of more infantry battalions and, especially, engineer regiments? Do we have an Army big enough for all that we are asking it to do?

The Prime Minister: Yes. We are sure that we can make the commitment necessary in Kosovo—we would not have made it otherwise—and at the conclusion of the strategic defence review we will be in an even better position to do so.

Mr. Bill Rammell (Harlow): Does my right hon. Friend agree that the fact that not one European Union Government would support the Conservative party's proposals to renegotiate European Union treaties suggests that that policy is tantamount to a call to withdraw from the European Union? Is not that the reason why respected former Conservative Members of Parliament, such as Nicholas Scott and Sir Julian Critchley—*[Laughter.]*—have today written to national newspapers to say that they cannot bring themselves to vote Conservative on Thursday?

The Prime Minister: It is a measure of the new extremism in the Conservative party today that people such as Ian Gilmour, Nicholas Scott and Julian Critchley are derided when their names are mentioned. *[Interruption.]* I say to those Conservative Members who are shouting and bawling and parading their anti-Europeanism that one day they will regret it.

Mr. Ian Taylor (Esher and Walton): The fact that the NATO objectives during the conflict appear to be enshrined in the UN resolution is a cause of great satisfaction and justifies the cross-party support that the Prime Minister has had during this campaign. Does he expect China to support the resolution when it goes before the UN?

At the Cologne summit, was there any discussion about how funds will go into Kosovo? Does not the European Union need to do more than it has in the past and make a more cohesive effort to ensure that Kosovo can restore its economy and the fabric of its society, as well as its democracy? The responsibility of the European Union to accelerate the process of enlargement will also require increased funds. Is that fully understood? The welcome attempt by Europe to play a greater defence role within NATO requires real leadership if the public are fully to understand that such great progress in politics will not come cheaply.

The Prime Minister: First, in respect of China, I cannot speak for the Chinese Government but we hope that they will support the resolution.

Secondly, in respect of the Cologne European Union summit, I can tell the hon. Gentleman that there was discussion of the fact that we need a substantial commitment to regeneration and reconstruction in the Balkans. I agree entirely with his remarks about Europe's common foreign and security policy, enlargement and defence capability. One reason for our desire to engage in the debate about a common defence policy is that it had been intended that Europe would have a common defence and security policy in any event. We faced a choice between engaging with that debate and shaping it in a way that was fully consistent with NATO, and opting out once again. I am afraid that the latter option is the view of those on the Opposition Front Bench.

I think that opting out would be foolish, but I agree that the debate does imply changes of policy in member states. There is no question of abolishing the British Army in favour of a European army. That has always been an absurd scare. However, if Europe is to develop a proper and serious defence capability, we must examine the strategic capability of European defence and the European defence industry to see what changes are necessary. Kosovo has brought that lesson home to us in a very stark way.

Mr. Denzil Davies (Llanelli): Is my right hon. Friend able to tell the House who will be responsible for the civil administration in Kosovo? Will it be the United Nations? Also, what does he envisage to be the likely legal status of Kosovo? Will it be an international protectorate under the United Nations, or an independent state, or will it still be subject, however nominally, to Serb sovereignty?

The Prime Minister: As I said, the civil administration will be guaranteed by the international community, and discussions will be held about Kosovo's eventual status. However, even if the territorial integrity of the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia is respected, there is no question of the Serb authorities being able to govern the lives of people in Kosovo, as the question from my right hon. Friend implied. That is precisely why all the Serb forces, police and paramilitaries must leave the region and why a proper civil administration must be established there. It is also why we want Kosovo eventually to be returned to the democratic will of its people.

Sir John Stanley (Tonbridge and Malling): May I return to a question from my right hon. Friend the Leader of the Opposition that the Prime Minister did not answer? Why has one of the key provisions in the Rambouillet accords—that after three years there should be an international meeting to determine the final status of Kosovo—been dropped from the agreement reached with Milosevic?

The Prime Minister: That is not right: the resolution specifically states that full account must be taken of the Rambouillet accords. However, part of the reason why that provision has been overtaken by events is that people will now have to discuss what Kosovo's future will be. That discussion, of course, will take full account of the wishes of the people of Kosovo. Independence for Kosovo was not part of the Rambouillet accords, although the idea of having a later conference to determine the matter was. However, under the resolution that is being passed, a discussion of Kosovo's proper status in the future will continue over the next period of time.

Ann Clwyd (Cynon Valley): Will my right hon. Friend confirm that even today when Milosevic is defeated, refugees crossing the border into Macedonia are being asked by the Serb authorities to renounce their citizenship before they are allowed to proceed? Will he reconfirm his resolve that Milosevic, as an indicted war criminal, must sooner or later stand trial before the International War

[Ann Clwyd]

Crimes Tribunal at The Hague? Will my right hon. Friend confirm that there is no hiding place for criminals such as Milosevic?

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend is absolutely correct that the Serbs continue to act as she says toward people who are fleeing from Kosovo. The indictment of Milosevic stands. Another indicted war criminal was picked up yesterday by British forces—those people are slowly but surely being picked up—and those not yet picked up are having to live perpetually in hiding. I agree that there must be no hiding place for indicted war criminals.

Sir Peter Tapsell (Louth and Horncastle): Is not the right hon. Member for Yeovil (Mr. Ashdown) right to say that it is not over until it is over on the ground in Kosovo? Is not the reality that NATO forces will face years of vicious guerrilla warfare and a situation not dissimilar to that faced by the German army there between 1941 and 1945?

The Prime Minister: No, I do not believe that. It is right to say that it is not over until it is over on the ground, but the agreement that we have made and that must be implemented is that all Milosevic's forces and paramilitaries must go. I do not believe that what the hon. Gentleman has described will in fact happen. If Milosevic fails to abide by the agreement, military action will follow, and he knows it. The alternative espoused by the hon. Gentleman would have been infinitely worse, allowing ethnic cleansing to continue unimpeded so that hundreds of thousands of people would have been driven from their homes or butchered. That is not acceptable.

Mr. David Winnick (Walsall, North): Is my right hon. Friend aware that the only reason for shame would have been to have taken no action alongside our allies against terrible crimes and atrocities against humanity? That would have been a stain on our country's reputation for years to come. The appeasers have been proved totally wrong, and it would do no harm if they offered some self-criticism. If Pinter is ashamed to be British, as has been reported, the remedy surely lies in his own hands.

The Prime Minister: I agree with my hon. Friend's general remarks. It is too early to talk about the situation being over, but if we succeed in having the UN resolution implemented, that will have happened only because we were prepared to use force. That is axiomatic.

Mr. Douglas Hogg (Sleaford and North Hykeham): May I ask the Prime Minister about the indictment of Mr. Milosevic? Now that Mr. Milosevic has been indicted as a war criminal, can the right hon. Gentleman tell us how he expects Mr. Milosevic to be brought before the tribunal? Am I right to think that it is not contemplated that NATO will effect an arrest, at least in the short term? Am I further right in thinking that the UN resolution makes no provision for an arrest?

Am I right to suppose that it is intended that the people of Serbia should depose Mr. Milosevic and then deliver him up? If that is so, is it not likely that Mr. Milosevic will cling all the more vigorously to power? What will happen if, in order to effect a peaceful transfer of power, the people of Serbia agree to let Milosevic live in peace in Serbia? Would we seek to reverse that decision?

The Prime Minister: There are those who say that we should never have acted. There are others who say that we should have gone all the way and removed Milosevic, but it was not possible to have that as a war aim. The UN resolution makes it quite clear that the work of the International War Crimes Tribunal stands; the tribunal does the indicting, and all member states are obliged to give it whatever support and help they can. I cannot comment on how matters will proceed except to say that we shall proceed as we have on other indicted war criminals. It is far better to have reached our present position than to have done nothing at all about Milosevic.

Dr. Norman A. Godman (Greenock and Inverclyde): Switching to the European Union, the Prime Minister made passing reference in his statement to enlargement. Given the obdurate refusal of a number of member states to agree to the reform of the common agricultural policy, how hopeful is my right hon. Friend that we can stick to the timetable for enlargement, or, is it not the case that we are now facing the threat of a two-class membership of the EU?

The Prime Minister: Without provoking shrieks and shouts from Opposition Members I can say that we should be able to get reform of the CAP in part due to the fact that much of it will be done by qualified majority voting; otherwise, there would have been a danger that much of the reform could simply be stalled. We would have preferred more radical agricultural reform, but as a result of the reforms that we agreed at Berlin, the British consumer will be saved about £1 billion a year. The agricultural reform process is absolutely necessary for enlargement, so we will push it as hard as we can. I hope by that to avoid what would be a significant problem for us, to which my hon. Friend rightly drew attention.

Sir Teddy Taylor (Rochford and Southend, East): Does it remain the policy of the Government and their allies that the KLA terrorist organisation must be wholly disarmed? Will the Prime Minister say how on earth he intends that that should be done? As for the right hon. Gentleman's rather unusual reference to the success of the single currency, will he make it abundantly clear—true or false—that if the Labour party is successful at the next election, there will be a referendum on a single currency shortly after the election?

The Prime Minister: We have made our position on the single currency clear time without mention. The hon. Gentleman's position is that we should never join a single currency. The position of Conservative Front-Bench Members is that they would not join for two Parliaments. Our position is that we should join a successful single currency, provided that the economic conditions are met. That is a sensible position. What is foolish is to rule out joining for ever. Even more foolish is to say, as those on Conservative Front Bench do, that they will not join for two Parliaments but will, in the meantime, cancel the changeover plan so that they could not join even if they wanted to do so. With the greatest respect to the hon. Gentleman, he is perfectly entitled to his view

that Britain should withdraw from the European Union, but I do not think that that would be in the country's interests.

Sir Teddy Taylor: Why not answer the question?

The Prime Minister: I have; I am afraid that the hon. Gentleman just does not like the answer.

On disarming the KLA, the disarmament process is set out in the United Nations resolution. Of course, the logistics are for the international force to work out.

Mrs. Alice Mahon (Halifax): Is the Prime Minister aware that yesterday Kenneth Baker, a Pentagon spokesman, said that many Serbs will want to exercise their freedom of movement and leave the province when NATO moves in? Given that the bombing was meant to try to prevent ethnic cleansing, which we apparently did not, will the Prime Minister give the House the guarantee that he will do everything possible to prevent further ethnic cleansing of the Serbs in Kosovo, many of whom have been ethnically cleansed from Krajina already?

The Prime Minister: Of course I give that undertaking. The international force is there to ensure that people are allowed to live in peace whatever their ethnic background. My hon. Friend cannot dismiss the fact that the ethnic cleansing that took place in Kosovo was of Kosovar Albanians. In relation to Serbs, I think that Mr. Baker was simply indicating—incidentally, my hon Friend offered a slight misconstruction of his comments—that the Serbs are free to go or to stay as they wish, but the international presence will be there to guarantee the peace, security and safety of all ethnic groupings. I was asked about this matter on television last night. Of course, it will be difficult because of what has happened and there is no point dismissing that or thinking that it will be easy for those communities to come back and live side by side with each other again.

We undertook the action to reverse the policy of ethnic cleansing and to install a proper, objective security presence. I have no doubt that British troops will be entirely objective in their handling of both ethnic groupings.

Mr. Michael Colvin (Romsey): At the summit, did the Heads of State of those countries that have joined the euro still think that it was going to work, bearing in mind that their economies are now diverging rather than converging? Was any estimate made of the sorts of cross-subsidy that will be required to maintain convergence? What will be the cost of meeting that end in terms of our contributions to the European budget?

The Prime Minister: None is the answer to the last part of that question, since the budget contributions were determined at Berlin. Before the hon. Gentleman and others dance on the euro's grave, let me point out that he and many others like him said that the euro would never happen. Whatever the fluctuations of the euro in the first few months, I think that it will require a little more time than he is prepared to give it to make an assessment. The answer to the first part of his question is that I believe that there is a very significant determination among those countries that are members of the euro to make it succeed. I think that he is a little premature in writing it off.

Mr. Clive Soley (Ealing, Acton and Shepherd's Bush): If, as I hope, we are moving from the military to the political phase, to rebuilding political stability in the Balkans, can the Prime Minister assure me that we will do everything possible to keep Russia locked into the process and encouraged in that way?

I should not like this occasion to pass without placing on record our appreciation of the professionalism of our armed forces. The Prime Minister's leadership has been outstanding. I hope that he receives many letters of apology from all the armchair critics who told him that his policy was doomed to failure and that all that we could do was to watch ethnic cleansing in Europe on our television sets.

The Prime Minister: Our troops have done a wonderful job and are now going to be called upon to do the most difficult part of their task: escorting the refugees back and making sure that they can live in peace. My right hon. Friend the Defence Secretary was out with the troops earlier today. They can be immensely proud of the role that they have played, particularly the humanitarian help that they have given. In respect of my hon. Friend's other points, the important thing now is to make sure that the peace is properly implemented and won as well.

Mr. Edward Garnier (Harborough): Is there not a danger that the indictment of President Milosevic will be seen by the Serb Government as a matter of no consequence and by others as amounting to no more than a gesture unless NATO and the Government take practical steps to bring it into effect? What practical steps can he and his fellow Heads of Government take to ensure that an indicted war criminal is brought to justice?

The Prime Minister: I do not think that anyone, least of all Milosevic, regards his indictment as merely a gesture or as insignificant. Some people say that we should be prepared to invade Serbia and bring Milosevic to justice, which is the only sure way of doing that, but for the reasons that I have explained, I do not think that we should take that position.

We are obliged to give all help to the International War Crimes Tribunal. We shall judge the best way that we can do that. Slowly but surely, the main war criminals from Bosnia are being picked up there. In the most recent period, I think that 13 have been picked up. While there is a limit to what we can feasibly do in these situations, we intend to go on doing everything possible to assist the International War Crimes Tribunal, which we support.

Mr. Dale Campbell-Savours (Workington): Will the interests of the valiant people of Montenegro, whom we do not talk about much, be fully safeguarded in discussions over the next few days, particularly when the sides return to the famous tent in northern Macedonia to consider arrangements for the withdrawal of Serbian forces? I seek an assurance that they will not pass through Montenegrin territory because that could destabilise that part of Yugoslavia.

The Prime Minister: The people and Government of Montenegro and President Djukanovic deserve to be congratulated on their courageous stand over the past few months. We have made it very, very clear indeed that the troops are to withdraw to Serbia.

Mr. Nigel Waterson (Eastbourne): Can the Prime Minister explain why, following the Cologne summit,

[Mr. Nigel Waterson]

those European Commissioners tainted by sleaze are still at their desks, drawing salaries and building up their pension rights?

The Prime Minister: They are going. An entirely new Commission is going in. [HON. MEMBERS: "Entirely new?"] The Commission has to be reappointed again. *[Interruption.]* The Commissioners are all there under contracts signed when the hon. Gentleman's Government were in power.

Audrey Wise (Preston): Will my right hon. Friend tell us what steps will be taken to deal with the pollution of the River Danube and with the other environmental consequences of the war? Will additional economic, or other, conditions be placed on Serbia before reconstruction of its extensively damaged infrastructure can take place?

The Prime Minister: I would not pay too much attention to some of the allegations that have been made about environmental damage before evaluating them properly. For example, after investigation by wholly independent people from the UN, some of the allegations made about such damage were found to be false. I do not know the answer to the question of what environmental damage there is, but I suspect that there is a good deal less than some of the people who have been supporting Serbia would accept.

What we are saying is clear and straightforward: we cannot put international money into financing the reconstruction of Serbia while Milosevic remains in power. People would not understand it if we did so. It is important to give a democratic Serbia the prospect of being able to be part of Balkan reconstruction if it embraces the values of democracy.

Mr. Tim Collins (Westmorland and Lonsdale): Would the Prime Minister recommend entry to the euro at the current exchange rate?

The Prime Minister: We are not at the stage of discussing what exchange rate the pound and the euro should have, if we enter the euro. I believe that our policy is sensible. The hon. Gentleman's policy would effectively rule out the euro and cancel the changeover plan, which would mean that we could not join the euro even if we wanted to. That is not a sensible policy. If I were him—one of the younger, aspiring Members on the Conservative Back Benches—I would think about where he wants his party to be in a few years' time, rather than joining in—*[Interruption.]* Take it from us; we learned a long lesson in the 1980s. The way to get power is not to behave irresponsibly; the anti-Europeanism of the Conservative party is irresponsible.

Food Contamination (Belgium)

4.32 pm

The Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food (Mr. Nick Brown): With permission, Madam Speaker, I want to make a statement on the discovery of the presence of dioxins in certain Belgian animal feedstuffs and food products, and on the action that the Government have taken in response to safeguard human health.

The Belgian Ministry of Agriculture first received information in mid-March that severe health effects were being detected in laying chickens. The problem was traced to fat manufactured in January by the firm Verkest in Belgium and supplied for the production of animal feedstuffs. Approximately one month later, the Belgian Ministry of Agriculture was informed that high levels of dioxins had been found in feed for breeding chickens and in chicken fat analysed by the company producing the feed. After further tests for dioxins, the Belgian Government initiated, on 25 May, discussions on preventive measures with the Belgian industry. The UK Government firmly believe that the Belgian Government should have acted earlier to inform trading partners of the problem.

Dioxins are a group of closely related chemicals produced during combustion and as unwanted byproducts of some industrial chemical processes. Dioxins are not acutely toxic to humans at very low doses. Thus the likely intake of dioxins from short-term and sporadic consumption of contaminated food is expected to be insufficient to cause harm. Nevertheless, sustained exposure to dioxins over a long period is potentially damaging to humans: studies relating to industrial processes show that exposure to high levels of dioxins over a period of 20 years increases the risk of cancer.

The Government's public health advice on this incident is that, although it is clearly undesirable to consume contaminated products, there is no reason to anticipate harmful effects from the consumption of those contaminated Belgian products which may have entered the UK market. Feed contamination is believed to have occurred over a period of less than six months, and Belgian food in the affected categories represents a very small proportion of total UK consumption. None the less, the Government have acted swiftly, in close and effective co-operation with all the sectors of the food industry, to take all the steps necessary to protect UK consumers.

We first received information on Friday 28 May suggesting possible contamination of some eggs and poultry produced in Belgium. We established immediate contact with the European Commission, which was holding urgent and detailed discussions with the Belgian authorities about the extent and nature of the problem. Although at that stage the Belgian authorities suggested that exports of potentially affected product to the UK were minimal, we immediately advised the food industry to check with its suppliers that such products did not originate from the affected Belgian farms.

On Sunday 30 May I personally discussed the issue with Commissioner Fischler in the margins of an informal meeting of European Union Agriculture Ministers at Dresden. There were further extensive discussions between the Commission and the Belgian authorities, and with the member states, on 31 May to 2 June. We maintained close contact throughout with the food

industry, and specifically with a small number of companies which had sourced product in Belgium. The food industry acted quickly to withdraw potentially affected product.

On 2 June, in anticipation of a decision by the European Commission to prohibit the export from Belgium, and the sale in all member states, of poultry and eggs from the affected farms unless they could be shown to be free from contamination, the Government issued a food hazard warning on the action to be carried out by local authorities to trace all imports of eggs and poultry from Belgium. The European Commission decision was given formal effect on 3 June.

On 4 June, in anticipation of a further Commission decision extending the prohibition on export or sale to a further range of products—pork, beef and milk and milk products—I made two emergency orders under the Food Safety Act 1990 and section 2(2) of the European Communities Act 1972 to give formal legal effect to the Commission's decisions for the full range of affected products. Parallel legislation has been made in Northern Ireland. The European Commission formally adopted its decision on pork, beef and milk and milk products on 7 June. The powers under the emergency orders made in the United Kingdom had been in effect since midnight between 4 and 5 June.

The emergency orders make full legal provision for the seizure and destruction of any products that violate the requirements. Local authority enforcement officers have been fully briefed on those powers and on the need to ensure that food businesses are in compliance. Those measures complement and complete the speedy and proportionate action already taken by Government and the food industry to protect the public. I believe those actions to have been proportionate and in line with the need to protect public health and guarantee consumer confidence.

Right hon. and hon. Members will be aware that some non-EU countries, including the United States of America, Canada and Singapore, have taken steps to impose restrictions on imports of products from the EU. Although it is understandable that third countries should want to introduce restrictions on the import of Belgian products until the situation is resolved, it is disproportionate for other countries to seek to restrict imports from all the affected categories from all EU countries. There can be no basis on food safety grounds for such action, and it is deeply unfair to our domestic producers that they should, at least temporarily, lose their markets.

The Government are determined to continue to act with the food industry and local authorities to protect British consumers. Swift, proportionate action has been the Government's guiding principle since taking office, and it will continue to be so.

Mr. Tim Yeo (South Suffolk): I am grateful to the Minister for making the statement so promptly in the House, and for making a copy of the statement available to me in good time this afternoon.

The overriding priority must be the protection of all British consumers, as the Minister says. However, the issue also affects British farmers, whose products are banned from the United States, Canada and other countries.

With regard to British consumers, we fully support the action that the Government have taken so far. Will the Minister say when the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food first knew about the problem? Does he agree that it is disgraceful that the Belgian Ministry of Agriculture was informed about it in the middle of March, but that Britain was not told of the possible contamination until 28 May? Is it true that other European Union countries, including Holland, were told days, if not weeks, before Britain? What protest has the Minister made to his colleagues about that?

Does the Minister agree that to be kept in the dark by European Union countries is a pretty poor reward for all the concessions that the Labour Government made in the recent farm policy reform talks? Is it not possible that British consumers were needlessly placed at risk by the failure of the Belgian and European authorities to inform Britain more promptly? What assurance can the Minister give that if similar future situations arise, he will be informed more quickly?

Does the Minister agree that the scare highlights the urgent and overriding need to improve the labelling of food products in Britain? Why are not British consumers told where food was grown, not just where it was processed? Will he require all labels to show, first, the country of origin of the food, and secondly, the method of production of that food? Does he agree that without that information, every customer in a British supermarket is buying blind?

Does the Minister agree that the effectiveness of the current food traceability system is faulty? At a time when British farmers are required to invest more and more to improve traceability, there seems to be evidence that others are not doing enough. Does he accept that until traceability becomes more foolproof, consumers will not have confidence in labelling?

The Minister calls for proportionate action. Why does he not apply that principle to the ban on beef on the bone? If the ban on beef on the bone is the Government's idea of proportionality, can we take at face value their claim that

"there is no reason to anticipate harmful effects from consumption of . . . contaminated Belgian products"

—especially as it seems that until 11 days ago, the right hon. Gentleman did not even know of the existence of those risks? The Minister must not use proportionality as an excuse for inaction or complacency.

Does the Minister accept that in addition to protecting British consumers, he has a duty to protect and promote British agriculture? Does he believe that he has done so in this case? Does he agree that the current scare will strengthen the reasonable demands of British farmers to block imports of food produced by methods unlawful in Britain?

Can the Minister say how the proposed Food Standards Agency would help in such situations? Does he understand the fears of many British farmers and retailers that the agency will scrutinise them more closely than their counterparts abroad? British farmers are prevented from exporting to the United States, and the Minister says that that is deeply unfair. That reaction reflects his usual sympathetic response—but what does he intend to do about it? Has he a single proposal to make today that will end that outrageous discrimination against British farmers?

Is it not time that Britain's farmers and the countryside which they look after received some support from the Government? Is it not time we had a Government who

[Mr. Tim Yeo]

worked for a fair deal for British farmers, not only for farmers abroad, and who recognised that a fair deal for British farmers is an essential part of achieving proper protection for British consumers?

Mr. Dale Campbell-Savours (Workington): On a point of order, Madam Speaker. I am sorry to intervene so early, but did you see what happened just now at the Dispatch Box?

Madam Speaker: I saw nothing happen at the Dispatch Box, but I now see what looks like a rather nice box of chocolates. As hon. Members will know, if something is brought into the Chamber to be used as an illustration, it has to be described in such a way that it can be properly reported by *Hansard*.

Mr. Brown: The Opposition spokesman waves a box of Belgian chocolates at me. I am not sure whether that is intended as some sort of threat or as a goodwill gesture, but in any event I commend the chocolates to him and urge him to eat them.

The hon. Member for South Suffolk (Mr. Yeo) asked about the Food Standards Agency. The embryonic arrangements are already in place between my Department and the Department of Health and seem to have worked very well in dealing with this issue—officials were on to it straight away and issued the necessary notices in time. More than that, they worked closely with the United Kingdom food industry, which I praise for the close co-operation that the Government have enjoyed to make sure that the precautionary measures were put in place at once to provide protection for the public. Like the hon. Gentleman, the Government have that as their first and foremost objective.

I reject the charge of complacency. I was careful in my statement to go through the timetable of events and it would be impossible for any fair-minded person examining that timetable to decide anything other than that the Government have taken swift, effective and decisive action to protect the public.

As he always does on these occasions, the hon. Gentleman raised the question of beef on the bone. On the beef on the bone ban, I am acting on the clear-cut advice of the chief medical officer. There is no room for manoeuvre given to me, and the difference is that exposure to dioxin, we understand, is harmful to human health over time—it is necessary to be exposed to large quantities over a long period—but exposure to new variant Creutzfeldt-Jakob disease is invariably fatal to the victim. That is quite a difference and the ban is in place because the chief medical officer says that it is necessary for the protection of human health. Risk is proportionate, but if the disease hits, the effect is absolute—it is fatal.

The hon. Gentleman referred to traceability and asked whether the systems that are in place are faulty. That is not the case. We are able to act as proportionately as we have and in a targeted way precisely because of the traceability arrangements that are in place in the retail sector and in those sectors that service the catering sector.

The hon. Gentleman was on to a perfectly good point when he talked about labelling. All Agriculture Ministers are under pressure on labelling schemes—labelling for point of origin and method of production and to provide consumer information about ingredients. I am sure that we will return to that issue, but the Government are committed to providing proper information for consumers so that they can make informed choices on point of origin as well as on ingredients.

The hon. Gentleman implied that consumers have somehow been placed at risk in this country. It is the Government's view that no consumers have been placed at risk by this episode. He implied that we somehow made concessions that we should not have made in the recent renegotiation of the common agricultural policy. Far from it; I have told the House on a number of occasions that the United Kingdom's was a vanguard position designed to drive forward the agenda for reform of the CAP and I achieved more success in that than any previous United Kingdom negotiator.

I am disappointed that the Belgian authorities did not pass the information on to the Commission and other member states as soon as they had it and I believe that it is a scandal that the information was withheld. The hon. Gentleman asked when I first found out about it; the answer is 30 May, when Franz Fischler explained the situation to me in discussions about this and other matters. The Department first knew on 28 May, and officials immediately contacted the industry, particularly the sector that imports from Belgium.

We are having discussions with United States officials on the ban that the US has put in place. They are already re-examining the case for the ban, and are implying that it will not apply if European Union suppliers are able to show that their products have not been tainted with the contaminated Belgium feeds. So we are already making progress.

The hon. Gentleman referred to Canada. The Canadian ban applies not to the European Union as a whole but only to Belgium, which is a more reasoned, measured and proportionate response to the crisis.

The measures that the Government have taken, including using the reserve powers, are proportionate to the problem that we face. They provide for the protection of consumers, and do not require us to embark on the larger trade war that the hon. Gentleman seems to be urging on the Government.

Mr. Dennis Skinner (Bolsover): Can my right hon. Friend tell me whether the dioxin in Belgium is anything like the dioxin that we had in Bolsover some years ago in many of the fields around the coalite plant? Does he accept that what the Tories have said today is in sharp contrast with what they said when I called for a public inquiry into the high penetrations of dioxin in the Bolsover area, which were affecting the cattle and fields? Despite the 12 attempts that I made in the House, I never got a Tory Minister to agree to a public inquiry. When we hear the Tories now, we understand what a load of hypocrisy it is.

Will my right hon. Friend make the necessary inquiries, because people in Bolsover want to know which variety of dioxin is involved and whether there is any comparison? The dioxin in Bolsover was 245T.

Mr. Brown: There is a comparison. For human health purposes, the dioxin is essentially the same. My hon. Friend is absolutely right. The longstanding issue of

dioxin contamination in his constituency is still of concern. If my hon. Friend would like to come and discuss what can be done about it, I should be more than happy to see him. Yes, the problem exists and these dioxins have the same effect on human health. It is a question not of the existence but of the levels of contamination.

Mr. Paul Tyler (North Cornwall): The Minister has been rightly critical of the Conservative-led coalition Government in Belgium, who have obviously been extremely complacent and lethargic about giving information to the Commission and to other member states. Did he raise this issue with his opposite number in the Belgium Government at the Council meeting on 30 May? Does the Council of Ministers propose to make any improvement to the role of the European Commission as the watchdog on this matter? That is clearly an extremely important role.

Secondly, will the Minister enlighten us about what precisely is happening in this country to monitor the existence of these problems? The creation of the joint food safety and standards group, which was announced during the recess, is a welcome move, but it is extraordinary that the Ministry announced at the same time that the group does not intend to meet between June and October. Will it be a working, hands-on group carefully examining this issue, or will it simply be a backstop?

Thirdly, the Minister was right to draw attention to the action of the United States Government. Does he accept that, in the forthcoming trade talks in the World Trade Organisation, if the Americans are allowed to get away with this measure without proper scientific evidence that there is any public health reason to stop the import of food from the United Kingdom and to penalise British farmers and food producers, we will have a good case for resisting the import of American food products to this country because of the scientific concerns about genetically modified food?

Mr. Brown: I am absolutely convinced that economic protectionism offers no solution to any of these problems. The British Government believe that decisions in this area should be made on a scientific basis, and that public safety measures should be proportionate to the risk and should be targeted at the problem and not spread more widely.

The joint food safety and standards group was established in September 1997 to make the administrative arrangements that preceded the setting up of the Food Standards Agency. They seem to be working well, and officials stand ready to respond to any problem that may occur in the future. Nothing in their working arrangements would prevent them from doing so effectively.

As for the powers of the Commission, I believe that it acted firmly and decisively as soon as it found out about the problem. It was Commissioner Fischler who informed me of the issue and the background. The Commission seems to have taken a tough line with the Belgian authorities, which I consider wholly right. It has responded proportionately as well as firmly, and my actions here have paralleled those of the Commission on behalf of the European Union.

The hon. Gentleman asked what I had said to the Belgian Agriculture Minister at the informal Council meeting. The Belgian Agriculture Minister did not attend that meeting, because he had resigned.

Audrey Wise (Preston): I thank my right hon. Friend for his speedy and effective action to protect British consumers. I suggest that he remind the hon. Member for South Suffolk (Mr. Yeo)—in the context of his sniping at the Food Standards Agency—that the pre-legislative Select Committee considering the agency was, happily, able to conclude unanimously, in a helpful report, that the agency would be extremely helpful in maintaining food safety.

In the light of his answer to the hon. Member for North Cornwall (Mr. Tyler), does my right hon. Friend agree that what some of us are after can be properly described not as economic protectionism in relation to the United States, but simply as a strong and passionate desire for our consumers to be afforded the full right to choose what they consume, rather than having food imposed on them by the United States?

Mr. Brown: I strongly agree with what my hon. Friend has said about choice. The only way in which to provide proper consumer choice is to ensure that consumers are given adequate information at the point at which they make their decisions, and that means clear labelling. I have some sympathy with what the hon. Member for South Suffolk said about labelling, but I should feel more sympathy if the Conservatives had done more when they were in government.

My hon. Friend is absolutely right about the pre-legislative scrutiny of the Food Standards Agency. The Government's proposals were broadly welcomed, by the Scrutiny Committee among others. The Minister of State, Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food, has held a number of public consultation meetings throughout the country to discuss the Government's policy on the agency, and there has been an overwhelming welcome for the principle. Where there has been disagreement, it has concentrated on the method of funding.

Mr. Peter Luff (Mid-Worcestershire): I think there is general agreement in the House that the Minister's response has been entirely appropriate in relation to public safety, and that he has given consumers the necessary reassurance that this unfortunate incident poses no health risk to them. British farmers, however, may take a rather different view of the impact on them.

Some of what the Minister has said is confusing. Will he clarify it, and tell us exactly which countries are taking action against all European Union food exports? In his statement, he suggested that Canada was taking action, but in answer to my hon. Friend the Member for South Suffolk (Mr. Yeo) he said that it was not. Will he list the countries that are taking action, and will he demonstrate that he is taking the American threat, in particular, much more seriously than he appears to be? Is he, for instance, referring America's action to the WTO, given that the impact on British pig farmers would be particularly serious?

Mr. Brown: The action against British pig farmers is the most serious of the United States actions. If anything

[Mr. Brown]

could be more unfair than the totality, it is that. As the hon. Gentleman knows, the pig industry is experiencing difficulties in both the European Union and the United States. The prohibition of the relatively small but important volume of exports of pig products—worth about £8 million—from entry into the United States is disproportionate, and is not warranted by the facts.

I hope that it will not be necessary to take up the issue through the WTO. In my statement I referred to three countries: the United States, Canada and Singapore. The Canadians have banned only imports from Belgium; the ban does not extend to European Union products covered by the feedstuffs statement which come from outside Belgium. The United States and Singapore, however, have banned all European Union products that are covered by the European Union statement on affected products. The Government are making known our view that we regard such action as disproportionate, and we are already achieving some success in getting the action scaled back to what it properly should be.

Mr. Dale Campbell-Savours (Workington): My right hon. Friend will know that when contaminated food is removed from a food counter in a shop, the shopkeeper has the right to claim against his insurance policy, thereby affecting the premiums paid by all policyholders nationally. Has my right hon. Friend considered co-ordinating action by insurance companies—which, from what I have heard, must have been faced with a very large bill—with a view to bringing an action for negligence against the Belgian authorities, who were negligent in failing to reveal the information that they had on contaminated food in circulation?

Mr. Brown: I can foresee a number of civil actions arising from the incident, and there may be criminal actions as well. I have no statement to make now on those matters, which are for the civil courts and the appropriate authorities. However, my hon. Friend was quite right to say that food that may be a risk to the public has to be destroyed. That was the main thrust of the powers that we exercised between Thursday and Saturday last week.

Mrs. Caroline Spelman (Meriden): Does the Minister accept that, when farmers are being asked to dig into their pockets to pay for traceability, the current situation only serves to show that their investment could be in a flawed traceability system, and therefore not worth their while?

Mr. Brown: I do not think that. Traceability is of enormous importance for farmers and underpins consumer confidence. Moreover, if such a situation should arise in the United Kingdom, for example, we would be able to trace it back to its real source, rather than have a broader and perhaps more alarmist series of bans, with a detrimental effect on consumer confidence. Traceability ensures that United Kingdom consumers are able to have confidence in United Kingdom produce.

Mr. Paul Flynn (Newport, West): While I agree with everything that the Minister has said, and congratulate him on his swift action, is it not the case that people in the United Kingdom are still suffering from the previous Government's denial of information on food safety? Is there not still an attitude of fear in any food scare? Although it is right that we should be cautious of any additional risk from dioxins, dioxins are widespread—almost universal—in the environment. If one had a garden bonfire in which plastics were burned, dioxins would be present in fairly high concentrations. The risk from dioxins is always there.

The Minister said, and I fully accept, that his actions were proportionate. However, would it not be helpful if we stated the risk of dioxins in understandable terms, and compared that risk, even in Belgium, with that facing someone who is a smoker or a drinker? About 4,000 cancers are caused annually by alcohol. Would it not be sensible if we helped the public to understand and assess risk by stating it in numbers? If we were to do so, we would not have an entirely irrational situation in which food from the United Kingdom and many other European countries—

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Sir Alan Haselhurst): Order. The hon. Gentleman has gone on far too long. He must be aware that other colleagues wish to contribute.

Mr. Brown: I am extraordinarily sympathetic to what my hon. Friend has said. The Government have tried to do two things: to ensure that we protect the public in a proportionate way, and to do so without the issue causing alarm and unfounded fears.

My hon. Friend asked me about quantification—or at least explanation—of risk. Work is currently being done by my Department and by the Department of Health to examine how that might best be done. For the moment, however, we rely on the English language and on phrases such as "very small", which are insufficiently precise for the types of discussions that we are not infrequently finding that we have to have. I therefore agree with my hon. Friend that more work has to be done, so that we are able to explain risk in a measured way.

Mr. Douglas Hogg (Sleaford and North Hykeham): Does the right hon. Gentleman have any estimate of the total value of the goods that have to be destroyed throughout the European Union, and in the United Kingdom in particular, as a result of what has happened? Does he recall the enthusiasm of the then Belgian Government and the Belgian Members of the European Parliament for the establishment of a European Parliament inquiry into Her Majesty's Government's handling of the BSE situation? Will he use his best endeavours to encourage the European Parliament to set up a similar inquiry into the Belgian Government's conduct of this difficult situation?

Mr. Brown: That is very tempting, but no. [HON. MEMBERS: "Why not?"] Let me answer. I am content to leave the policing of the matter to the Commission, which has responded promptly, fairly and proportionately. Commissioner Fischler has made it clear that he is considering legal action on behalf of the Commission. It is appropriate that the matter should remain with him.

I do not think that the value of the goods to be destroyed in the United Kingdom is very great, but the situation is different throughout the European Union.

The sums of money involved in Belgium and to a lesser extent in France, Holland and Germany may—I repeat may—be considerable, but I have no firm estimate.

Mr. Tam Dalyell (Linlithgow): Perhaps my right hon. Friend might succumb to temptation. Many moons ago, when Madam Speaker and I were among the Members of this Parliament indirectly elected to the European Parliament, we noticed that our partner countries were somewhat more tardy in coming clean about their scandals than we British. May I press my right hon. Friend to find out by what mechanism countries can be made to be a bit more candid with one another more promptly?

Is my right hon. Friend satisfied that traceability in the retail trade is as active as animal traceability, following all his good work?

Finally—I do not expect an answer immediately—my right hon. Friend referred to studies of the industrial processes. I have great confidence in the scientific advice to the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food under all Governments. Will my right hon. Friend put in the Library the basis of the Government's concerns about the industrial processes, dioxins and cancer?

Mr. Brown: My understanding is that the industrial studies on dioxins are already in the public domain, but if they are held by my Department and are not in the public domain, I am happy to put them there. Our approach is one of openness. We intend to provide information promptly and we intend to hold others to their obligations. The correct mechanisms for doing that are through the European Union and the Commission in this case. The Commission has acted properly.

Mr. Tony Baldry (Banbury): Does the Minister accept that in recent years UK farmers have invested considerable sums in traceability and farm assurance schemes? Other member states have not. It is essential to press for the maximum amount of labelling and information partly so that consumers have the fullest possible information, but also so that UK farmers can be properly rewarded for the investment that they have made in full traceability and farm assurance.

Mr. Brown: As the hon. Gentleman knows, I am a strong supporter of the farm assured schemes. Traceability is in the interests of producers and consumers. It behoves us all, regardless of the politics of the situation, to get behind the Meat and Livestock Commission and its farm assured schemes, particularly on livestock. If people want to be certain that they are not consuming contaminated products during the current scare, they should look for the assured British label.

Mr. Gordon Prentice (Pendle): There is of course an international trade in animal feedstuffs and the former Minister for Agriculture presided over the export of contaminated feed to France. Has any Belgian contaminated feedstuff been imported into the United Kingdom, or indeed exported to any other EU country?

Mr. Brown: We understand that there have been exports to other European countries. The Belgian authorities have now confirmed that none of the contaminated feed has been exported to the United Kingdom. There have been imports of some Belgian feedstuffs, but because of their value, we believe that they could not have been contaminated. However, I am ensuring that that is thoroughly checked.

Mr. John Bercow (Buckingham): Further to the highly pertinent question from the hon. Member for Workington (Mr. Campbell-Savours), and given what the Minister described as his disappointment at the scandal, will he now tell the House whether he is satisfied, as a Minister accountable to the House, that there are sufficient penal sanctions available to apply to the Belgian Government and others who might in future be tempted to conduct themselves with such cavalier disregard for their responsibilities?

Mr. Brown: I do think that it was scandalous that the information was not provided at the appropriate time and I have no fear of saying so. I am content for the Commission to deal with that aspect of the matter. My first concern is the protection of the public in this country and we have taken robust steps to ensure their protection. As the crisis in Belgium unravels, the costs will become substantial. I would not want to forecast where it will end up, but surely the way forward for the European Union is to put right the problem of contaminated feedstuffs in Belgium and to make sure that the safeguards there are sufficiently robust to ensure that it cannot happen again.

Mr. James Gray (North Wiltshire): I was alarmed to hear the Minister say a moment or two ago that the Department knew about the crisis on 28 May, but that he heard about it during casual conversation with Commissioner Fischler on 30 May. Is it normal that the Department keeps matters of huge importance secret for two days before reacting? In that context, will he tell the House whether he has 100 per cent. confidence in the very large quantity of chicken meat and dried egg imported from Thailand? If so, how does he come to have such confidence?

Mr. Brown: Because the European Union carries out inspections of producers in Thailand. I believe that my Department was represented on the last mission that went to inspect. As for the point about when Ministers were told, the Minister of State was told on 28 May, which was a Friday. I was told on 30 May, which was a Sunday. During my meeting with Commissioner Fischler we discussed a range of issues. He informed me not that the issue was in the public domain—I knew that—but of its details. He was good enough to talk me through precisely what he perceived the problem to be and how the Commission was able to proceed. With that knowledge, our officials could make sure that we set in hand the necessary safeguards here—or at least some of them—in advance of the Commission taking action.

Points of Order

5.13 pm

Mr. David Faber (Westbury): On a point of order, Mr. Deputy Speaker. I seek your guidance, having given Madam Speaker prior notice of what I sought to raise. I have been involved in correspondence with the Secretary of State for Health for a number of months concerning the closure of a ward in my constituency. The last occasion on which I wrote to him was 23 March—11 weeks ago—since when I have had no acknowledgement and no answer to my letter, in spite of tabling written questions subsequently. Furthermore, I now understand that the Secretary of State's Parliamentary Private Secretary, in her role as secretary of the GMB group in the House, met a group of my constituents representing the GMB without informing me of that fact.

Do you share my disappointment at the lack of courtesy to me and my constituents in that the Parliamentary Private Secretary apparently went behind my back to meet my constituents to discuss a subject on which, after 11 weeks, I have still not had a reply from the Secretary of State?

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Sir Alan Haselhurst): The hon. Gentleman will know that these are not strictly matters for the occupant of the Chair. All Members of Parliament appreciate that there is no harm in there being more, rather than less, communication when colleagues are involved in matters in one another's constituencies. It is customary for Ministers to try to see Members of Parliament who have particular problems in their constituencies, and I am sure that what the hon. Gentleman has said will have been heard by Ministers.

Mr. Tim Boswell (Daventry): On a separate, but somewhat related, point of order, Mr. Deputy Speaker. Having tabled questions to the Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions and to the Department of Trade and Industry on the last day before Whitsun for answer today, I was disappointed to receive a reply today saying that those questions will be responded to by Ministers "shortly". As nearly two weeks have elapsed since the questions were tabled, we must ask what Ministers have been doing in that time, and whether it is appropriate that they cannot respond promptly when they have been given proper notice.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Some of us can recall occasions when replies have been either extraordinarily prompt or extraordinarily delayed—it does happen. I am sure that the hon. Gentleman knows that the occupant of the Chair cannot determine these things, but his point will have been heard by Ministers.

Animal Welfare (Prohibition of Imports)

5.16 pm

Mr. Tony Baldry (Banbury): I beg to move,

That leave be given to bring in a Bill to make it illegal to import into the United Kingdom any meat or food product originating from any country where animal welfare standards are not certified as being equivalent to animal welfare standards in the United Kingdom.

The purpose of the Bill—which has an added relevance, given the statement that the House has just heard—is straightforward. Over the years, at the behest of constituents and consumers, the UK has been continuously improving animal welfare standards. Sadly, such improvements have not been matched in other EU member states or in other countries generally. Meat products are increasingly being imported from countries without such high animal welfare standards, undermining British agriculture. Clearly, this is crazy.

The Bill has broad support across the House. It has the support of a number of former Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food Ministers, those representing rural constituencies and Members from both sides of the House who are known to take a leading interest in animal welfare issues. It is a Bill on which consumers, farmers and those concerned with animal welfare can unite.

British agriculture is suffering its worst crisis for 50 years, with falling farm incomes and rising debts. There are reports of farmers having to sell healthy calves for just 29p each—less than the price of a pint of milk. There are fears that a substantial proportion of pig farmers may be driven out of production because of their losses. The average age of farmers in the UK is estimated to be 58. One wonders what the prospects are for UK farming if that continues. Who will take over, and what will happen to our rural communities?

As Members who were in the House at the time will recall, the UK—at the behest of hundreds of constituents—raised its standards for meat production in pig farming, banning the use of stalls and tethers from 1 January this year. Elsewhere in the EU, the ban on the use of tethers is not due to come into effect until 2005, and there is no ban at present on the use of stalls.

As the ban came into effect in the UK after a seven-year phase-out, the cost to the producer amounted to a margin reduction of about £18 per sow, per year, and a reduction of 85p per pig produced per year. Pig farmers have estimated that the costs of the enhanced animal welfare standards here add a further £4.50 to the production costs of each pig—something that has not been borne elsewhere in the EU or the world.

It is not only in pig production that we have higher welfare standards. We have higher standards for veal calves in the United Kingdom, and the European Union generally has higher standards on hormones in beef and on antibiotics than elsewhere in the world. The British Pig Association estimates that the additional investment cost to the UK pig industry of the enhanced animal welfare standards has been about £220 million, and that the operating cost for the slaughter of each pig has increased by £1.50. We have extra costs, which our competitors do not have to meet, for slaughter as well as for enhanced animal welfare standards.

In evidence to the Agriculture Committee, the British Pig Association said:

"In complying with the bans on sow stalls and tether systems and use of meat and bonemeal in pig feeds and by introducing effective national quality assurance schemes with due traceability, UK pigs,

and therefore their products, have achieved distinct superiority over those in other EU or third countries. The industry is entitled to believe that it should receive just recognition of these achievements and merit appropriate reward in the market place."

Sadly, that is not happening. The association went on to say:

"Because multiple retailers and caterers appear not to secure financial advantage from the higher UK specification they appear to be, to varying degrees . . . adopting double standards: insisting on a high UK specification while accepting imports that do not meet those standards."

In other words, retailers and supermarkets are increasing their imports of pigmeat and other meat products from elsewhere that do not come up to the high UK welfare standards.

It is not only pig producers and farmers who say that. The British Veterinary Society accused retailers of ignoring welfare, traceability and food safety standards in a quest for cheaper meat and fatter profits. The BVS commented that increasing quantities of cheap pigmeat are being brought in from Europe and labelled as "packaged in Britain", without conforming to the conditions that have been enforced on British farms.

The BVS is concerned that pigmeat is derived from pigs that have been treated with medicines that cannot be used legally in the UK: for example, thallium, a preservative in vaccines. It gave many examples of pigs produced elsewhere in the European Union and in countries such as Poland not conforming to standards that would be accepted here.

The president of the BVS said:

"Retailers should not then drop all principles, buy in cheap, imported products and try to deceive the public by clever labelling."

Consumers are entitled to have products on the supermarket shelf clearly labelled and UK farmers are entitled to get the benefits of the investment that they have made in full traceability and better-quality farm assurance.

That view is supported unanimously by the Agriculture Committee, whose report said:

"The Government should redouble its efforts to secure an early and positive review of"

the EC directive relating to stalls and tethers. It continued:

"We regret the fact that the EU standards have been allowed to lag so far behind the UK's and want to see any future changes in animal welfare legislation imposed and implemented on a uniform basis throughout the EU."

The report said:

"We also consider that the retailers and manufacturers should support government efforts to provide for higher standards of animal welfare by not directing their purchases to cheaper producers elsewhere and by insisting that European suppliers maintain the same standards . . .

The Government should also amend the procurement contracts of Ministries, Departments and other public bodies to ensure that all pigmeat is sourced to welfare standards no lower than the UK specification."

That view is supported by UK farmers. The British Pig Association, not unreasonably, said:

"We believe that government could do more to ensure that their own purchasing departments (MoD etc) and departments that have influence over other public purchasing agencies"—

such as local authorities—

"source product up to the UK's high standards."

The association continued:

"In the case of pigmeat, government should set out guidelines and exert greater influence on securing pork, bacon and other pigmeat products that comply with the high UK standards of quality assurance, traceability, animal welfare and food safety."

Those are points that the recent Belgian scare has made only too well.

It is not only pig farmers who should be entitled to feel the benefits of investment in high welfare standards. We should also be investigating how the import of meat and meat products produced by methods illegal in the UK can be stopped for beef, poultry and eggs. The Bill is a proportionate measure and I hope that it will have the full support of every hon. Member. I also hope that it will unite consumers, farmers and those concerned about animal welfare.

Question put, pursuant to Standing Order No. 23 (Motions for leave to bring in Bills and nomination of Select Committees at commencement of public business):—

The House divided: Ayes 173, Noes 0.

Division No. 201] **[5.26 pm**

AYES

Abbott, Ms Diane
Allan, Richard
Amess, David
Anderson, Donald *(Swansea E)*
Arbuthnot, Rt Hon James
Ashton, Joe
Baker, Norman
Baldry, Tony
Ballard, Jackie
Barnes, Harry
Beard, Nigel
Beggs, Roy
Beith, Rt Hon A J
Bell, Martin *(Tatton)*
Bennett, Andrew F
Benton, Joe
Berry, Roger
Borrow, David
Boswell, Tim
Bottomley, Peter *(Worthing W)*
Brady, Graham
Brake, Tom
Brand, Dr Peter
Brinton, Mrs Helen
Bruce, Ian *(S Dorset)*
Bruce, Malcolm *(Gordon)*
Buck, Ms Karen
Burnett, John
Burns, Simon
Campbell, Rt Hon Menzies *(NE Fife)*
Campbell–Savours, Dale
Cawsey, Ian
Chapman, Sir Sydney *(Chipping Barnet)*
Chaytor, David
Clappison, James
Clark, Rt Hon Dr David *(S Shields)*
Clark, Dr Michael *(Rayleigh)*
Cohen, Harry
Collins, Tim
Colvin, Michael
Corbyn, Jeremy
Cormack, Sir Patrick
Cotter, Brian
Cran, James
Crausby, David
Cryer, Mrs Ann *(Keighley)*
Cummings, John
Curry, Rt Hon David
Dalyell, Tam
Davey, Edward *(Kingston)*
Davidson, Ian
Davies, Geraint *(Croydon C)*
Davis, Rt Hon David *(Haltemprice & Howden)*
Dawson, Hilton
Day, Stephen
Donohoe, Brian H
Drew, David
Drown, Ms Julia
Duncan, Alan
Edwards, Huw
Evans, Nigel
Faber, David
Fallon, Michael
Fearn, Ronnie
Fitzpatrick, Jim
Flint, Caroline
Foster, Don *(Bath)*
Foster, Michael Jabez *(Hastings)*
Foster, Michael J *(Worcester)*
Gardiner, Barry
George, Andrew *(St Ives)*
George, Bruce *(Walsall S)*
Gibb, Nick
Gibson, Dr Ian
Gill, Christopher
Godman, Dr Norman A
Green, Damian
Greenway, John
Grieve, Dominic
Griffiths, Jane *(Reading E)*
Hamilton, Rt Hon Sir Archie
Hammond, Philip
Hancock, Mike
Heald, Oliver
Healey, John
Heath, David *(Somerton & Frome)*
Heathcoat–Amory, Rt Hon David
Hinchliffe, David
Howard, Rt Hon Michael
Howarth, Gerald *(Aldershot)*
Jack, Rt Hon Michael

Jenkin, Bernard
Keetch, Paul
Kennedy, Charles *(Ross Skye)*
Key, Robert
King, Andy *(Rugby & Kenilworth)*
Laing, Mrs Eleanor
Lansley, Andrew
Leigh, Edward
Letwin, Oliver
Levitt, Tom
Lidington, David
Livingstone, Ken
Livsey, Richard
Lloyd, Rt Hon Sir Peter *(Fareham)*
Llwyd, Elfyn
Love, Andrew
Luff, Peter
McDonnell, John
MacGregor, Rt Hon John
McIntosh, Miss Anne
Mackinlay, Andrew
Maclean, Rt Hon David
McLoughlin, Patrick
Madel, Sir David
Malins, Humfrey
Marshall, Jim *(Leicester S)*
May, Mrs Theresa
Michie, Bill *(Sheffd Heeley)*
Mitchell, Austin
Moffatt, Laura
Mountford, Kali
Murphy, Jim *(Eastwood)*
Naysmith, Dr Doug
Nicholls, Patrick
Oaten, Mark
O'Hara, Eddie
Öpik, Lembit
Ottaway, Richard
Palmer, Dr Nick
Pendry, Tom
Pickles, Eric
Pike, Peter L.
Pond, Chris
Prentice, Ms Bridget *(Lewisham E)*
Prentice, Gordon *(Pendle)*
Randall, John
Redwood, Rt Hon John
Rendel, David
Ruffley, David
Russell, Bob *(Colchester)*
St Aubyn, Nick
Sarwar, Mohammad
Sheldon, Rt Hon Robert
Shipley, Ms Debra
Simpson, Alan *(Nottingham S)*
Skinner, Dennis
Smith, Angela *(Basildon)*
Smith, Miss Geraldine *(Morecambe & Lunesdale)*
Smith, John *(Glamorgan)*
Spelman, Mrs Caroline
Spring, Richard
Stewart, Ian *(Eccles)*
Stringer, Graham
Stunell, Andrew
Syms, Robert
Taylor, John M *(Solihull)*
Townend, John
Trend, Michael
Tyler, Paul
Tyrie, Andrew
Vis, Dr Rudi
Waterson, Nigel
Webb, Steve
White, Brian
Whittingdale, John
Widdecombe, Rt Hon Miss Ann
Winterton, Mrs Ann *(Congleton)*
Winterton, Nicholas *(Macclesfield)*
Wise, Audrey
Wyatt, Derek
Yeo, Tim
Young, Rt Hon Sir George

Tellers for the Ayes:
Mr. James Gray and
Mr. Andrew Robathan.

NOES

Tellers for the Noes:
Mr. Eric Forth and
Mr. John Bercow.

Question accordingly agreed to.

Bill ordered to be brought in by Mr. Tony Baldry, Mr. Roy Beggs, Mrs. Angela Browning, Mr. David Curry, Mr. David Faber, Mr. Douglas Hogg, Mr. Lindsay Hoyle, Mr. Archy Kirkwood, Mr. David Prior, Angela Smith and Mr. Tim Yeo.

ANIMAL WELFARE (PROHIBITION OF IMPORTS)

Mr. Tony Baldry accordingly presented a Bill to make it illegal to import into the United Kingdom any meat or food product originating from any country where animal welfare standards are not certified as being equivalent to animal welfare standards in the United Kingdom: And the same was read the First time; and ordered to be read a Second time on Friday 11 June, and to be printed [Bill 113].

Orders of the Day

Pollution Prevention and Control Bill
[Lords]

Order for Second Reading read.

5.38 pm

The Minister for the Environment (Mr. Michael Meacher): I beg to move, That the Bill be now read a Second time.

The Bill is short but important. It flows from a piece of European legislation—the integrated pollution prevention and control directive, which the United Kingdom and, to be fair, the previous Government can be rightly proud of pioneering. It is, if I may use a famous phrase, a win, win, win Bill. It will be good for the environment, for industry, for local people and for local democracy. What is more, the benefits will be reaped across the whole of Europe. Integrated pollution prevention and control is an example of the European Union at its best, improving the quality of life for all citizens and extending a level playing field on which industry may compete. It is an example of how well the EU can be made to work when there is constructive engagement from the UK.

Much in the Bill is not new. The directive's roots are firmly planted in current UK pollution control regimes, and I shall explain briefly how those work. The Environmental Protection Act 1990 established a number of pollution control regimes. In particular, it established integrated pollution control and local air pollution control. The integrated approach was first put forward by the royal commission on environmental pollution in 1976 to tackle difficult industrial problems at source, whether they affect air, water or land.

Miss Anne McIntosh (Vale of York): Will the right hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Meacher: I am just starting to explain the background. I will give way, but I suggest that the hon. Lady should allow me to make a little progress.

The royal commission cited a ridiculous case in which a company had been required to use water to prevent gaseous fluoride from causing air pollution. The contaminated water ended up in sewage sludge, which was in turn spread on grazing land—the cattle developed fluorosis and a minor air pollution problem became a serious land pollution problem.

The integrated pollution control regime covers around 2,000 industrial processes in England and Wales and about 200 in Scotland. It is operated by the Environment Agency and the Scottish Environment Protection Agency. It affects mainly the power generation, oil refining, metal, mineral and waste disposal industries—in other words, in general big installations with significant potential to pollute.

Miss McIntosh *rose—*

Mr. Meacher: I can see that the hon. Member for Vale of York (Miss McIntosh) is not going to allow me to proceed, so she had better make her point.

Miss McIntosh: I am grateful to the Secretary of State for giving way. Is he aware that the directive now extends

to pig farms? Did the Government intend that it should do so? Did Labour Members of the European Parliament draft an amendment to extend it to pig farms under his instructions, although those farmers are suffering difficult competitive conditions?

Mr. Meacher: As I said, the integrated pollution and prevention control regime originated in Europe under the previous Government. The extension to intensive pig and poultry installations is, indeed, part of the IPPC directive. I am surprised that the hon. Lady has raised that point because the previous Conservative Government agreed the directive in Europe. We certainly take the view that that extension is perfectly sensible and proper.

I was explaining the existing IPC regime. Under the parallel system of local air pollution control, local authorities regulate about 13,000 less polluting processes for emissions to air only. The regimes require an operator to have a permit before he or she can operate a specified process. The regulator then sets conditions on the permit to require the use of the best available technology not entailing excessive costs—to use the awful acronym, BATNEEC—to prevent or minimise polluting emissions.

At their core, the regimes are based on a site-specific, case-by-case judgment about the best cost-effective pollution control for that plant. It is an approach that ensures sensitivity to local conditions and to the circumstances of the operator. It is much more effective and efficient than, say, a rigid set of emission standards.

This flexible approach can reduce the operator's costs. I shall give an example. Permit conditions for coal handling usually require that a wheel washing machine, costing around £40,000, be installed to remove coal dust. My Department decided an appeal where an operator had covered his yard in tarmac and was scrupulous about maintaining and cleaning his site. In the circumstances, the equipment was not necessary.

The IPPC directive now extends those principles throughout the European Union.

Dr. Norman A. Godman (Greenock and Inverclyde) *rose—*

Mr. John Bercow (Buckingham) *rose—*

Mr. Meacher: I will first give way to my hon. Friend.

Dr. Godman: I am grateful to my right hon. Friend. Will he confirm that the Scottish Parliament has an important role to play in relation to clause 3 of the Bill in the determination of regulations? I think that that holds true for the Welsh Assembly and, eventually, for the Northern Ireland Assembly, presumably. Will my right hon. Friend refer to the covering of offshore installations in his speech? If so, am I right to think that, despite the role of the Scottish Parliament, enforcement in respect of offshore installations and structures will be under the Department of Trade and Industry?

Mr. Meacher: My hon. Friend is correct on both points. The Bill's powers will be fully devolved to the Scottish Parliament and the Welsh Assembly. He is right to think that it applies to offshore installations. The Bill will be used to implement Lord Donaldson's recommendations for command and control of operations in the event of a threat of serious pollution from offshore oil and gas installations. He is right to think that that remains with the DTI.

Mr. Bercow: Will the Minister give way?

Mr. Meacher: I am sure that the hon. Gentleman will harass me until I give way, so it is better that he gets his bile out now.

Mr. Bercow: Far be it from me ever to be accused of harassment. The right hon. Gentleman should know by now that I am a thoroughly genteel and charitable soul. In view of the directive's intended replacement of BATNEEC, best available technology not entailing excessive costs, with BAT, best available techniques, will he confirm that he is satisfied that there will be sufficient consideration of the likely increase in costs to small businesses? Does he accept that that is especially important not only because of his own responsibilities, but because of the position adopted by the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry on the reduction of regulation and costs on small businesses?

Mr. Meacher: Yes. There is a change from BATNEEC to BAT. There is no question of a change in respect of the account taken of cost effectiveness, including in relation to small businesses, which are important. The phrase "available techniques" in no way diminishes the existing regard for cost effectiveness. The directive states that

"'available techniques' shall mean those developed on a scale which allows implementation in the relevant industrial sector"—

these are the crucial words—

"under economically and technically viable conditions, taking into consideration the costs and advantages."

In fact, there is a greater definition of cost-effectiveness under BAT in the Bill than the Environmental Protection Act 1990 gave under BATNEEC, which remains a relatively undefined concept in United Kingdom legislation.

The hon. Member for Buckingham (Mr. Bercow) asked about small businesses. Integrated pollution control is overwhelmingly concerned with large installations. IPC and the local air pollution control regime cover fewer than 20,000 installations. For example, only a very small number of the 130,000 members of the Federation of Small Businesses will be affected by the regulations.

Let us consider the effect across Europe.

Mr. Bercow: Before the Minister continues, he has not answered my question. *[Interruption.]* Labour Members can cavil from sedentary positions for as long as they like, but I make no apology for speaking up for the interests of small businesses in my constituency. If there is no reason for small businesses to be unduly concerned, why has their national representative organisation, the Federation of Small Businesses, expressed grave concern about the likely costs?

Mr. Meacher: The hon. Gentleman abuses his position in seeking to intervene twice and make such remarks. I am perfectly prepared to answer his questions directly. I have already told him that the Federation of Small Businesses covers 130,000 small businesses, hardly any

[Mr. Meacher]

of which will be caught under the directive. Any concern expressed involves very few firms. They are no more affected in terms of cost-effectiveness by the new regulation than by BATNEEC.

The IPPC directive extends those principles across Europe in a manner that is similar to the UK's IPC regime. All member states will now benefit from an effective and efficient system of pollution control, and industry—I repeat—will benefit from a level playing field.

The environment will also benefit. As we always say, pollution does not respect national boundaries. Indeed, the directive requires member states to consult their neighbours about installations that have a significant trans-boundary effect. One important improvement in this post-Kyoto world is the inclusion of energy efficiency among the factors to be considered by the regulator. Climate change was, of course, not one of the big environmental priorities back in 1990 when the current regimes were established. By setting conditions requiring cost-effective energy efficiency measures, the IPPC directive should cut carbon emissions by about 3 million tonnes of carbon a year by 2010; that is about one twelfth of the total needed to achieve our target. It is a no-regrets policy: while benefiting the environment, energy efficiency measures will bring financial benefits to the businesses themselves. Most of industry has welcomed that new aspect.

The IPPC will also take account of noise pollution. I believe that that is a long-neglected issue which seriously affects people's day-to-day quality of life. In addition, the new system will take account of the use of raw materials and apply a holistic approach to waste minimisation. There will be a new requirement for operators to leave a site clean and safe when they move on.

Mr. James Gray (North Wiltshire): The Minister is proud of the fact that noise pollution is included. Why is light pollution not included?

Mr. Meacher: As I have said, noise pollution is included. One could include all sorts of pollution. I am not making—dare I say it?—a partisan point, but the previous Conservative Government agreed for the UK the ingredients of the IPPC directive that now has to be transposed into our national law. I should like the directive to extend to all forms of pollution. I have some sympathy with the hon. Gentleman. However, if he wants an answer to his question, perhaps he should ask some of those who were Ministers in the previous Conservative Government.

Mr. Simon Burns (West Chelmsford): Perhaps I can help the right hon. Gentleman. As he is aware, in clause 1 the Government try to take the legislation further than the directive signed up to by Ministers in the previous Conservative Government. Subsection (1)(b) refers to provisions

"regulating, otherwise than in pursuance of that Directive, activities which are capable of causing any environmental pollution."

Why could the Government not include light?

Mr. Meacher: Under that reading of the provision, that is possible. It was not our direct intention, but I should be happy to consider the matter in Committee. However, the issue of pollution has been substantially extended in a perfectly proper way. Most people would not consider that light pollution was in the same category as noise pollution or issues such as vibration, waste, use of raw materials and energy efficiency. Those are much more significant matters, but let us explore in Committee whether there are other matters that we agree should be included.

The directive extends integrated pollution control to more installations with a significant potential to pollute. If the hon. Member for Vale of York will attend, she will note that I am drawing attention to the point that she made. Such installations include about 1,000 landfill sites, a similar number of large intensive pig and poultry farms and about 500—perhaps almost 1,000—food and drink factories. The directive will also extend integrated control to about 10 per cent. of installations that are currently regulated only for air emissions. We believe—and I am surprised that the hon. Lady does not appear to agree—that that is a desirable extension to the existing IPC parameters.

Through the Bill, we shall improve the environmental regime offshore—the point referred to by my hon. Friend the Member for Greenock and Inverclyde (Dr. Godman). The IPPC directive applies to large combustion plant on offshore oil and gas installations. We are using the Bill to implement this year the requirements of the Oslo and Paris convention of 1992—Ospar—on the use and discharge of chemicals from offshore installations. The Department of Trade and Industry, which retains responsibility for those matters, has just completed a first round of consultations on implementing those requirements efficiently and coherently, and on making other improvements to the offshore regime.

The measure is good for industry. We are implementing the directive in a manner that will benefit our industry rather than lumber it with a regulatory mess. Had we taken the easy option of imposing the directive using the powers under the European Communities Act 1972, we should have ended up with three regimes: an IPPC regime, covering the 6,000 installations that the directive specifies; an IPC regime, covering about 400 processes that we control through IPC, but which are not covered by the directive; and a local air pollution control regime, covering the remaining 11,000 or so processes. I believe that we made the right decision and, as a result, the Confederation of British Industry and other industry groups have strongly supported the Government's approach.

Some good deregulatory ideas have been thrown up for improving the way in which things are done under the Environmental Protection Act 1990. For example, we shall be able to extend the permit review period if circumstances so warrant, rather than be forced to review an operator's permit every four years—in other words, there will be more flexibility. That will minimise costs by introducing standard application procedures and standard permit conditions where an industry sector is suitably homogenous. Of course, each installation will always have the right to be assessed individually if the operator chooses. Crucially, however, IPPC retains the essential principle that costs should be imposed only where there are commensurate benefits.

When the Bill was debated in another place, some noble Lords doggedly promoted the misconception that replacing the principle of best available technology not

entailing excessive costs—BATNEEC—with the directive version, best available techniques, meant abandoning the consideration of cost when setting conditions for an operator. I repeat a point that I have already made because it is important and there has been a misunderstanding: it is a patent untruth. The directive spells out the principle of cost-effectiveness in its definition of best available techniques much more clearly than the 1990 Act did in its concept of BATNEEC.

The measure is good for local democracy and for local people. We are determined to strengthen the participation of local people in the process of pollution control in their neighbourhood. About 10 per cent. of the installations currently regulated by local authorities will need to move to integrated control—traditionally, the realm of the Environment Agency for England and Wales. However, I propose to keep local authorities responsible for the bulk of those installations in England and Wales. I intend to strengthen the partnership and dialogue between the Environment Agency and local government more generally—a matter to which I give great attention. Under the new system, local authorities will have a strong role to help them in their new responsibilities for local air quality management.

We are also boosting the involvement of local people more directly. The Environment Agency will soon consult on proposals for enhanced public consultation in respect of regulating particularly contentious installations; at the same time, we shall remove unnecessary consultation on routine changes.

Mr. Gordon Prentice (Pendle): My right hon. Friend will know of the tremendous controversy about pollution from the cement industry. Will he say more about the content of the public registers that are to be given details of the integrated pollution control processes? If some of that information is to be out of bounds to the general public because it is allegedly commercially confidential, many people's faith in the new system will be badly dented.

Mr. Meacher: I strongly support my hon. Friend's point, and I want the maximum amount of information to be made available. I am well aware that commercial confidentiality can be construed in a way that is designed to prevent the public from obtaining information that is not genuinely confidential, but whose publication would be inconvenient to the company concerned. I am determined to ensure that the way in which we extend the use of the pollution inventory—which, together with the Environment Agency, I announced last month—will not enable such manipulation to take place.

Through public registers and over the internet, the inventory will give the public free access to information about pollution from all IPPC-regulated installations in the local area. However, that is only the first step: the Government are considering plans to extend the inventory further, to the landfill sites and sewage treatment works that the agency regulates and, further still, to the 13,000 or so installations regulated by local authorities.

Through the Bill, we shall increase public participation, extend openness and enable people to make informed decisions based on their having access, for the first time, to comprehensive information about what is being emitted in their midst. I hope that hon. Members on both sides of the House will welcome the Bill and so reflect the broad consensus of support among industry, the regulators and environmental groups. The Bill will lay the foundations for an updated pollution control regime, strengthen environmental protection and bring benefits to industry and individuals alike.

One of the beauties of the regime is its adaptable and evolving nature: it is a flexible, interactive form of regulation in which experience and good ideas can be shared and spread, and I am keen that that should happen. The very process of regulation promotes the development and improvement of technologies and techniques that bring wider and greater benefit. That process will be far more dynamic now that the whole of the European Union is part of it. I commend the Bill to the House.

6.3 pm

Mr. Simon Burns (West Chelmsford): As the Minister said, the Bill implements European Union directive 96/61, to which the last Conservative Government signed up in 1996. It will come as no surprise to him to learn that we stand by our commitment to the directive and that we agree with the broad principle underlying the Bill. However, although the Minister was charming, helpful and reasonable, I noted his failure to mention the massive and glaring omissions from the Bill.

The Minister knows that the Bill, which started life in another place, has had an extraordinarily rocky and chequered career since receiving a Second Reading there on 7 December last year. What causes me most concern is not the philosophy that the Bill reflects or the regimes that it would introduce, for those command widespread cross-party support—I am most concerned about its constitutionality. We have before us today a piece of primary legislation which simply gives the Secretary of State wide-ranging powers to issue regulations to implement it. Nothing of importance to do with the control of pollution is on the face of the Bill, which consists of a series of clauses giving the Secretary of State powers to impose secondary legislation to flesh out the skeleton of the primary legislation.

That causes me great concern for the simple reason that the procedures of the House do not allow us to amend secondary legislation in any way. Some statutory instruments are fortunate enough to be debated in Committee, and I accept that, thanks to the actions of Members of another place, a large proportion of the regulations to be promulgated under the Bill are to be subject to the affirmative resolution procedure and so will probably be debated in Committee. However, the regulations will have to be accepted, or rejected in their entirety. Anyone can do the mathematics: given their majority, if the current Government want to get a statutory instrument through a Committee, they can ensure that it gets through. The Government nominate hon. Members to sit on statutory instrument Committees and, as an ex-Whip, I fully understand what happens. Therefore, the potential lack of scrutiny causes me great concern.

Hon. Members who have followed the Bill's progress through the other place will be aware that it has not had the smoothest of passages. The House of Lords Select Committee on Delegated Powers and Deregulation reported that the Bill represents

"an inappropriate delegation of secondary powers",

and called for amendments to

"specify with more precision the ambit of the legislation".

[Mr. Simon Burns]

I welcome the concessions that their lordships extracted from the Government to improve what was initially an extremely flawed piece of legislation, but the process resembled extracting teeth from an unwilling patient.

Mr. Meacher: The hon. Gentleman raises an important point, but he has drawn the wrong conclusion. In fact, a set of regulations is a far more flexible instrument than a piece of primary legislation. It is in the interests of those who are regulated that their problems and their needs are dealt with as expeditiously as possible. We have ensured a proper degree of parliamentary control: the regulations will be subject to the affirmative resolution procedure when they are first made, and thereafter when certain important amendments are made to them. I should point out that the House of Lords Select Committee, which the hon. Gentleman quoted, believed that to be adequate.

I repeat the commitment given by my noble Friend Lord Whitty in another place that

"any amendments to the regulations which affect matters which were previously included on the face of the Employment Protection Act 1990 will be put to Parliament for consideration under the affirmative procedure."—[*Official Report, House of Lords*, 13 May 1999; Vol. 600, c. 1391-92.]

I believe that that fully meets the hon. Gentleman's concerns about parliamentary control.

Mr. Burns: In response to the latter half of the right hon. Gentleman's intervention, I paraphrase Mandy Rice-Davies—he would believe that, wouldn't he?

I was going to raise this point later in my speech, but now might be an opportune moment for the Minister to develop the argument and so help us to determine whether the Government's actions are satisfactory. Will he tell me, in plain simple language, the exact meaning of clause 2(7)?

Mr. Meacher *indicated dissent.*

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Sir Alan Haselhurst): Order. We will have to treat that as a rhetorical question.

Mr. Burns: I am left with no choice but to treat it as a rhetorical question. I am rather stunned that the Minister did not respond. It is his Bill, and he should be conversant with it. I assumed that he would be able to give me a straightforward answer. Even if the right hon. Gentleman does not think so, it is an important question, given what he said in his intervention about the Government's commitment on the affirmative procedure. If the Minister does not want to respond, we will pursue the matter by other means.

Mr. Bercow: In the light of what we have just witnessed, does my hon. Friend agree that, as Baroness Thatcher once observed in a different context, the right hon. Gentleman does not appear to be entirely the master of his subject? Does my hon. Friend agree, furthermore, that if, in future, significant numbers of regulations are to be subject only to the negative procedure, not to the affirmative procedure, that will undermine the importance of the maximum consultation period set for draft regulations in order to accommodate the needs of small businesses?

Mr. Burns: My hon. Friend is right. I could not agree with him more. Proper scrutiny is crucial, as the primary legislation gives the Secretary of State powers to issue secondary legislation to define how the system will operate. It is important that we should have a clear explanation of what clause 2(7) means. If it means what I think it means, it devalues—I do not means this in a rude way—the assurances given about the use of the affirmative resolution. The Minister is entitled not to answer, but I will get to the bottom of the matter. I see that the civil servants are passing him a note, so I hope that we shall be able to clear it up.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. The hon. Gentleman has experience. He should know that there can be no references to anyone other than hon. Members in the House.

Mr. Burns: I am extremely sorry, Mr. Deputy Speaker. I genuinely did not realise that. I will not repeat the error.

As drafted, the Bill gives the Secretary of State carte blanche to impose regulations. There is little to require him to bring matters to the proper attention of Parliament. With such powers, it is clearly an unacceptable procedure for the Government to use secondary legislation in such a sweeping and all-embracing manner.

The problem is not that the Secretary of State will have too much power to benefit the environment. Because of the way in which the Bill is drafted, it gives him the potential to do a great deal of damage in the name of the environment, without being exposed to the cautionary voices that a process of full and proper parliamentary scrutiny can offer.

As was done in another place, we will seek in Committee to examine carefully the powers being granted to the Secretary of State, and to ensure that his decisions are subjected to an appropriate degree of scrutiny.

It should be incumbent on the Secretary of State to demonstrate that any regulations that he makes under the Bill will address a significant problem. Any regulations made under the Bill should be measured against pre-determined criteria. A point of reference should be established in advance with which regulations would be required to comply. If they did not comply, it would be for the Government to justify them before Parliament.

Mr. Gareth R. Thomas (Harrow, West): Does the hon. Gentleman accept that, under the European Communities Act 1972, the directive could have been transposed into law without the full range of scrutiny that the Bill allows? My history is sufficiently good for me to remember that the 1972 Act was introduced by a Conservative Government. Surely the hon. Gentleman accepts the assurances given by my right hon. Friend, and admits that we will have much more detailed and effective scrutiny of the system than would have been the case if the directive had simply been implemented in its own right.

Mr. Burns: The hon. Gentleman is correct to say that when we went into Europe—the votes were taken in 1971

and 1972—it was under a Conservative Government with the support of, I think, 69 Labour Members of Parliament—

Mr. Terry Rooney (Bradford, North): Sixty-eight.

Mr. Burns: I think that the hon. Gentleman is forgetting the deputy leader of the Labour party, who resigned his position as a result of that vote.

The hon. Member for Harrow, West (Mr. Thomas) may be right to say that the Government and the previous Government would have had the choice of introducing the measure under the 1972 Act or through primary legislation. I believe that the Government have taken the right decision to use primary legislation in the House, rather than implementing the system under the 1972 legislation, which would have produced three competing regimes.

My complaint is not that the Government are using primary legislation, but that the primary legislation is simply a series of clauses giving the Secretary of State unlimited powers to issue orders and regulations in the future to flesh out what I believe should be written into the Bill. I cannot think of any other legislation of this nature that has come before the House under any Government which is so much a skeleton to be fleshed out by secondary legislation.

The present Secretary of State may have benign intentions and may use the legislation wisely—I do not question that. However, it remains to be seen whether his successors can be relied on to do the same. The claim that the Government would never dream of using the powers to harm industry or agriculture may or may not be true, but, sadly, in the real world, the road to hell is paved with good intentions.

The Lords Select Committee on Delegated Powers and Deregulation commented:

"We consider that any regulations which amend or repeal an Act of Parliament should be subject to affirmative procedure".

I welcome the initiatives in another place to improve the Bill so that it meets that aim. That strikes me as a common-sense way to amend the Bill at an earlier state. However, it does not contribute to good environmental practice if businesses are forced to operate under conditions of great uncertainty about the legislative framework.

One of the problems with regulation in general is that it often encourages organisations to adopt a culture of minimum compliance—they comply to the letter with regulations, but make no effort to improve their activities further. That is human nature and not an unreasonable attitude.

Organisations look to the Government to provide a definition of what constitutes responsible environmental practice. If they are faced with an ever-changing vista of laws and regulations, they will not know where they stand. What is acceptable environmental practice one day could, under the Bill, become unacceptable within weeks.

There is no obligation on the Secretary of State to engage in proper consultations, despite clause 2(4). It may be the Secretary of State's intention to widen the consultations, and I welcome the fact that in another place the Government accepted an amendment on the consultation process to include agriculture in the specified organisations and bodies that were to be consulted. However, after a Government have gone through the process of consultation, there is nothing to oblige them to take account of the representations that they receive. That is why—*[Interruption.]*

Mr. Burns: The Under-Secretary rather demeans her post by making sedentary comments such as that.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions (Ms Glenda Jackson): I pose again the question that I put to the hon. Gentleman from a sedentary position: what is the point of consulting if one does not listen to the responses of the consultees? That might have been the country's experience under the previous Administration, but it is not its experience under this Government.

Mr. Burns: I do not want to fall foul of the rules of debate, but the Minister might like to have a word with the disability groups in her constituency because, in the light of the vote before the Whitsun recess, I do not think that disability groups in this country think that the Government go through meaningful consultations and listen to their representations.

We are not calling for an end to environmental legislation. On the contrary, one of our chief criticisms of the Government is that, despite making a raft of promises to improve on the UK's already excellent record, they have yet to produce a major piece of environmental legislation. Sadly, the Bill is not proper, fully fleshed out environmental legislation, but simply a framework—a skeleton for the Secretary of State to build on through secondary legislation.

Our case is simple: important decisions should be subject to appropriate scrutiny, but we do not believe that that will happen under the Bill. For example, I invited the Minister for the Environment to intervene to discuss clause 2(7). Would he or the junior Minister be kind enough to give a simple explanation of what that provision means? We may have misread it, which is why it is important to have clarification. Could the negative resolution procedure be used in respect of draft regulations that are laid before the House? If so, that significantly undermines what the Minister has said about use of the affirmative resolution procedure.

Mr. Meacher: In the past several minutes, the hon. Gentleman has made a number of statements that simply do not stand up to scrutiny. First, he expressed doubts about the consultation. Clause 2(4) states:

"Before making any regulations under this section, the Secretary of State shall consult—

(a) the Environment Agency . . .

(b) the Scottish Environment Protection Agency . . .

(c) such bodies or persons appearing to him to be representative of the interests of local government, industry, agriculture and small businesses".

That seems to me to be as extensive a pattern of consultation as one could ever ask for.

Secondly, the hon. Gentleman said that he wants every matter to be dealt with in primary legislation; my point is that business would prefer flexibility. A set of regulations relating to the needs of industry is likely to be far more flexible than primary legislation, which, as he knows, is difficult to amend.

[Mr. Meacher]

Thirdly, my statement on parliamentary scrutiny stands. If the hon. Gentleman wants information, clause 2(9) refers to cases that have to be approved by affirmative resolution. Otherwise, clause 2(7) provides a choice between the negative or the affirmative procedure, but none of that diminishes the point that I made, and that statement stands.

Mr. Burns: I am grateful to the right hon. Gentleman, but may I press him a little further? He rightly draws attention to clause 2(9), but used the word "otherwise" in respect of clause 2(7). Will non-draft orders made under subsection (7) be subject to the negative resolution procedure, and will other orders have to be made subject to the affirmative resolution procedure? That is the nub of the matter. Is there any way—are there any circumstances—in which regulations made under subsection (9) could be subject to the negative resolution procedure?

Mr. Meacher: I was correct to remain seated when first challenged because the further we proceed with what is supposed to be a Second Reading debate, the more we get into the kind of detailed and precise argument that normally takes place in Committee. I will answer the hon. Gentleman's question briefly, but he is abusing the procedures of the House by making such arguments now.

All the cases specified in clause 2(9) have to be decided by affirmative resolution. The position is somewhat different under clause 2(7), which provides that there should be a choice between either the negative or the affirmative procedure, but I have made it clear that we accept that it would be correct to use the affirmative procedure for making important changes to provisions in the Environmental Protection Act 1990. I hope that that satisfies the hon. Gentleman.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Perhaps I can help the House. It is not an abuse for any matter to be raised during a Second Reading debate, but it is certainly customary for such debates to be confined to points of general issue and principle.

Mr. Burns: I will move on now, although that point is fundamental.

Mr. Gray: Before my hon. Friend moves on, which he says he is about to do, does he agree that the Minister and the junior Minister made great play of the consultation process that they have gone through? Is he aware of the letter from the Federation of Small Businesses, which states:

"The FSB contended in the strongest possible terms that small businesses could not afford the implementation of such a directive.

Following the FSB's response to that consultation, it does seem to us that we were taken out of the loop as far as further discussions of this item were concerned and the FSB has no evidence of even an acknowledgement of its original response."?

Mr. Burns: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for making part of the point that I was making and for referring to the FSB. I noted carefully what the Minister said, but, at national level, the federation has expressed deep concern about that aspect of the Bill, which he says is restricted to a limited number of its members. The 1990 Act, which currently sets the framework for integrated pollution control, stipulates that pollution control should be achieved through best available technology not entailing excessive costs—BATNEEC, as he said. The Bill, pursuant to the directive, would substitute for that common-sense approach the concept of best available techniques.

I listened carefully to what the Minister said about cost. There is a view abroad, which is not confined to the FSB—as he said, it was raised in the other place—about whether best available techniques would be applied irrespective of cost. He gave some interesting quotes from the detailed workings of the directive about that, and I was reassured to hear them. There is little to be gained by pursuing the matter now, but we should certainly do so in Committee. Small, medium-sized and large businesses clearly need to be reassured that there will not be a problem because of the omission of the words "not entailing excessive costs". We need to be able to set people's minds at rest that the understanding is a misunderstanding at the moment, and we will raise that point later.

I shall refer briefly to two important issues—one has been raised by the Country Landowners Association and one by the National Farmers Union—that we will want to discuss further in Committee and which merit discussion in the context of this debate. The CLA is particularly concerned that

"clauses 1 and 2 take the Secretary of State's powers beyond the scope of the Directive. The Directive clearly sets out in its Annex 1 the activities that should be controlled. Clause 1(1)(b) and (c) of the Bill specifically refer to activities other than those listed in the Directive."

I raised that issue in an intervention. That is fine, because, as my hon. Friend the Member for North Wiltshire (Mr. Gray) said, we may consider light pollution and other issues. It would be extremely useful for us to pursue other areas.

The NFU is concerned that the original version of the Bill, which started in the other place, contained a general definition of environmental pollution that has now been extended to tie it in to pollution

"which may give rise to any harm".

Clause 1(3) contains a definition of "harm". Although there is a reference to "harm" in the original directive, the definition now proposed in the Bill extends the concept to include matters such as harm to the health of "other living organisms" as well as to human beings, and includes an

"offence to the senses of human beings".

On the latter point, the NFU says that

"noxious smell is clearly a potential source of pollution, but the definition would appear to encompass visual offences to the senses of human beings which would be likely to be highly subjective."

The NFU raises a specific concern about the definition of pollution. Pollution of air includes air in buildings but, in some agricultural situations, the building is itself a pollution prevention control measure. For example, in a power station fuelled by chicken manure, the fuel is stored in a building under negative atmospheric pressure. Mushroom composting facilities may also use buildings to control pollution. Clearly, those facilities should not be regarded as pollution in themselves. The Minister may think, with some justification, that we should consider that

matter in Committee, but it must be examined—the NFU does not raise these issues just to pass the time of day; they are of genuine concern to its members.

Mrs. Teresa Gorman (Billericay): My hon. Friend will be aware of the effect that the well-meant landfill tax has had on farmers, who have this year alone identified 60,000 cases of fly dumping as a result of legislation that was meant to help to control environmental pollution. We must be careful before we put powers into the hands of Government officers or statutory bodies and introduce legislation that may have devastating, unforeseen effects.

Mr. Burns: I shall read my hon. Friend's comments carefully in *Hansard* tomorrow, because we may well consider this aspect in Committee.

We do not object to the basic aims behind this legislation, as there is a need for an integrated system for the control of pollution. However, I have some misgivings about the way in which the regulations will be issued, and about the fact that primary legislation is being used to give the Secretary of State so much power to make orders by secondary legislation.

Despite the sterling work in the other place to improve the Bill, it is wrong in principle to rely so exclusively on secondary legislation. We shall consider this measure carefully in Committee, as we want to build on the work that was done in the other place to improve it.

6.34 pm

Ms Joan Walley (Stoke-on-Trent, North): My warm welcome for the proposals has been slightly marred by the negative contribution of the hon. Member for West Chelmsford (Mr. Burns). We have heard much about the omission of provisions on the best available technology not entailing excessive costs—or BATNEEC to those of us who have sat through many Committee stages of previous environmental pollution Bills. We have not, however, heard a great deal about emissions. The hon. Gentleman's speech was about omissions, not about emissions that pollute the air, water and land and damage the health of all living organisms.

The House must understand that this welcome legislation deals with a subject that matters to people across the country, and is not about the concerns of one or two vested interests. We are concerned about the damage, pollution and contamination caused by those vested interests, and the legacy and liabilities that we have inherited because they have not understood and invested in the importance of environmental and public health. I hope that in Committee the hon. Member for West Chelmsford will take a more positive approach, so that we can get this legislation right.

I should declare an interest, because I am a vice-president of the Chartered Institute of Environmental Health and the chair of the all-party environment group, which I am pleased to say contains many hon. Members from both sides of the House. I welcome the Pollution Prevention and Control Bill because, once enacted, it will give us the toughest set of pollution control measures in Europe. Unlike the hon. Member for West Chelmsford, I have every confidence that my right hon. Friend will undertake any necessary further fine tuning. In other legislation before the House, such as the Freedom of Information Bill, and through the agenda of competitiveness promoted by the Department of Trade and Industry, the Government will ensure that we have joined-up thinking across Departments, throughout Europe and among local authorities through consultation with local people. That is desperately needed and long overdue.

I pay tribute to the people who have worked to get us to this stage. I do not underestimate the importance of the Environmental Protection Act 1990 and all the other work that has been done, but time is running out and much more needs to be done. The European directive must be on the statute book by the end of this year. It is right that we should deal with the matter as quickly as possible, especially given the full scrutiny to which it was subjected in the other place.

I have sat on Committees considering previous Bills. I am aware of the shortcomings of the current legislation from the point of view of my constituents. Yesterday, I received a document from the city of Stoke-on-Trent pollution control unit. It shows that large parts of my constituency will not meet air quality objectives even by 2005. We stand a far better chance of setting and meeting targets because of the work that my right hon. Friend the Minister is doing and will continue to do.

Mr. Gray: Is the hon. Lady saying that the good people of Stoke-on-Trent would not set such targets were it not for the Bill?

Ms Walley: I am saying that the people of Stoke-on-Trent depend on the Government to ensure that the highest standards are set, and that the resources, procedures and framework are put in place to start to deal with the legacy of the industrial revolution. In my area we have made huge advances in air quality control, but much still needs to be done, and will be done under the Government.

The Select Committee on Environmental Audit, of which I am a member, is looking forward to monitoring the real changes and benefits that the Bill will provide as a result of the implementation of the European directive.

Despite my positive welcome for the Bill, I would not like the House to think that I do not have a few words of warning. There must be proper enforcement. In the past, Her Majesty's inspectorate of pollution has been starved of resources. Huge advances have been made, ensuring that both the Environment Agency and local authorities are adequately staffed, and I was very pleased to hear what my right hon. Friend said about the extra work that would be done with local authorities; but, without enforcement, none of what we are trying to do can become a reality. Another problem is that, as always, the devil is in the detail. In the case of provisions that are not currently in the Bill, we must place our trust in my right hon. Friend, and let it be known that we are doing so.

As I have said, I welcome the fact that local authorities will be involved, and that communities will participate and be consulted. Only this week, I received a letter from the Environment Agency telling me of the consultation that will take place throughout north Staffordshire. That is crucial: our public and environmental health agenda will succeed only if we can inform and educate the public and ensure that they are with us, and only their vigilance will enable us to make the strides that we want to make.

The legislation will need careful scrutiny in the coming months, and throughout the consultation period. We must consider who will administer the controls, and how those

[Ms Walley]

people will be trained. I was pleased to learn that the Chartered Institute of Environmental Health would be involved in the training. Moreover, universities and research establishments throughout the country will be given opportunities to ensure that training initiatives are launched, and that a team of experts will work with the informed public to keep pollution control high on everyone's agenda. I am confident that, at some stage, my right hon. Friend will work with his colleagues in the Treasury to provide adequate resources through the revenue support grant.

Much will depend on the progress of the Freedom of Information Bill. I was pleased that my hon. Friend the Member for Pendle (Mr. Prentice) mentioned that earlier. I cannot stress its importance too strongly. We must have information on pollution levels, and that information must be freely available to the public; otherwise, we shall not have the joined-up thinking that is so essential to the changes that we want.

I mentioned loopholes. Since the Environmental Protection Act 1990 came into effect, I have had time to develop an understanding of the impact of some of those loopholes on my constituency. I shall be interested to hear from the Under-Secretary of State, my hon. Friend the Member for Hampstead and Highgate (Ms Jackson), how the Bill will sit side by side with planning guidance. Given the legacy of existing land use, it is all too easy for planning permission to be given, followed by authorisation for polluting processes. If we do not have joined-up thinking at local level—in planning guidance, and among planning officers—integration will be difficult. I hope that it will be made clear in Committee that the planning process will be involved. After all, once planning permission has been given, it is too late to start thinking about the impact of polluting processes and installations. Stoke-on-Trent city council fears that

"the absence of planning policy guidance on the status of air quality issues in the development control process"

may lead to problems. Rather than storing up such problems for the future, we should deal with them at the outset.

Certain provisions are missing in the Bill. We must ensure that regulations, and the flexibility to which my right hon. Friend referred, will be there as and when we need them, enabling us to respond quickly to any emergencies that may arise.

I have sat through meetings of the Select Committee on Environmental Audit, which has received evidence from the Environment Agency. Everyone welcomes the news that energy efficiency is to be part and parcel of integrated pollution control, but we must get it right. There are intensive industrial users of energy in my constituency, two of whom have contacted me. One is well known in the House: we daily drink tea and coffee from Dudson Duraline ware. The other company is Steelite, which manufactures wonderful table ware that is used in hotels and, indeed, here. [HON. MEMBERS: "Hear, hear."] I am grateful to hon. Members for recognising that.

Both those companies have made enormous advances in trying to reduce the amount of energy that they use. Each has spent some £150,000 per annum, and has been happy to do so. They are pleased to participate in climate change; what they want is a level playing field. Perhaps my right hon. Friend, along with his colleagues at the Department of Trade and Industry, will consider the whole issue of competitiveness. Today Stoke-on-Trent launched a major report, the Ecotec report, as a result of the Government's work. I hope that the Environment Agency, and all Departments, will work with the ceramic and pottery industry to ensure that energy efficiency is considered in sufficient detail.

Contaminated land is another crucial issue. I note with interest that proposals that were to be announced in July have been delayed until November. My right hon. Friend will correct me if I am wrong.

I fear that there could be a lawyers' charter, and that local authorities could spend many months arguing about what is and is not harmful. Those who live in areas where there is contaminated land want, above all else, action to deal with the contamination and dereliction. I urge my right hon. Friend to consider a regime to deal with the legacies and liabilities that the past has given us.

The problems of farmers have been mentioned. The spreading of condensate is a problem in my constituency. I should like clarification—if not today, at a later stage—in regard to the installations that will be covered by the new proposals. Will rendering processes be included? In my constituency, liquid offal condensate has spread on grazing land. Recommendations have been made by the Spongiform Encephalopathy Advisory Committee, but we are currently depending on case-by-case initiatives by local authorities rather than an holistic, integrated pollution-control approach. Given the problems that we may be storing up, I feel that we should have a proper pollution control regime.

I may have spoken for too long. I welcome the proposal, and hope that, in five or 10 years' time and in the long term, we will lay foundations to prevent the pollution that has affected so many people in the past.

6.50 pm

Mr. James Gray (North Wiltshire): It is a great pleasure and privilege to speak in this debate, and to follow the hon. Member for Stoke-on-Trent, North (Ms Walley). However, I did not quite understand the thrust of one of her points. If the Stoke-on-Trent local authority is so happy with the way in which it is handling pollution control—the report that she mentioned described its happiness—why is she so enthusiastic about implementing the European directive, essentially to force her local authority to do what it is already doing quite adequately?

Ms Walley: As the hon. Gentleman well knows, my point was that all local authorities need the support and framework that the Government are introducing, to ensure that the work they are doing is done with the greatest resources and best support.

Mr. Gray: I shall return to that point later in my speech. I am not sure that the Bill promises more resources to help in reducing pollution—as we all seek to do—but suspect that it implies a significant increase in the resources that will have to be supplied by private industry, farms and other parties.

I should like first to say that this is a particularly flimsy little Bill. It is also the first Bill that the Government have introduced on any aspect of the environment. The Water

Charges (Amendment) Bill may be cited as an example of environmental legislation, but it was more to do with charging than with anything else. The Government have introduced absolutely no environmental legislation—nothing on air quality, or on water quality.

Ministers had a water summit, but that did not amount to a hill of beans. They have done nothing on the countryside, other than talk briefly about the possibility of a right to roam Bill. I am glad to see the hon. Member for Pendle (Mr. Prentice) on the Government Back Benches—he is promoting a private Member's Bill on the right to roam—but, so far, we have heard nothing official from the Government on that Bill.

Although we have heard talk from the Government about a series of aspirations, and warm words about press releases, launches and consultations, no less an organisation than Friends of the Earth has described the Government's entire environmental policy as "Carry on Consulting". So far, that is all that we have had from this so-called green Government. The Chancellor of the Exchequer made great play of his green Budget, but it contained hardly anything that is the slightest bit green—with the exception of increasing petrol prices, and we know precisely where that has led the Government. The Budget was not green at all.

Petrol price increases and the Government's threatened minerals tax have nothing to do with environmental taxation, but are to do with raising extra revenue for the Treasury.

Mr. Gordon Prentice: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Gray: I should be happy to give way to the hon. Gentleman, as long as he does not talk about the right to roam.

Mr. Prentice: The hon. Gentleman is talking complete tosh, and he knows it. The Budget provided for a 25 per cent. duty reduction on alternative fuels, specifically to encourage people to change to using cleaner, environmentally friendly fuels. He should now apologise.

Mr. Gray: The hon. Gentleman has a nice line in humour, as he demonstrated the other day in his speech on the right to roam—but I shall not be led down that track.

The Government's record on green issues is pretty thin. However, they have another two or three years of this Parliament, and we look forward to seeing some very interesting legislation to address environmental issues—such as the legislation introduced by the previous Government in our 18 years in office. We should think back to Baroness Thatcher and her great speech on the environment. She invented the word "environmentalism". So far, however, this brave, environmental and green Government have produced only this flimsy piece of paper, amounting to so disappointingly little.

The Bill is particularly disappointing because, originally, it amounted to a licence for the Secretary of State to decide, in the privacy of his own room, the regulations that he wished to introduce and the industries that he wished to regulate. Originally, it was a huge Henry VIII Bill—as was noted in Committee in the other place, when it forced the Government to change the Bill's title and much of its detail.

Some of my noble Friends in the other place—such as Baroness Byford, Lord Dixon-Smith, Lord Jenkin of Roding and Lord Pearson of Rannoch—subjected the original Bill to a terrible attack, forcing the Government to change substantial parts of it. Nevertheless, in many respects, the Bill that we are now debating is still a bad one. I shall explain later, and in detail, why the Bill is a bad one. Essentially, however, it is bad in principle.

The previous Government passed the Environmental Protection Act 1990, after which the European directive on the subject was issued. This Bill's only real purpose is to implement that directive. As I asked in an intervention in the speech of the hon. Member for Stoke-on-Trent, North, why should this sovereign Parliament need a European directive to demonstrate what we have to do with our own industries, farmers and small businesses? The Minister for the Environment did not listen to small businesses at all in consultations on the Bill.

Why do we need a European directive to tell our small business people what they should do about pollution? Surely this place is sufficiently worthy, intelligent and hard working to tell our small business people and others what they must do to deal with pollution. It is bad in principle to introduce fairly damaging legislation merely to satisfy a European directive.

Mr. David Drew (Stroud): I am intrigued by the hon. Gentleman's comments. In a previous life, he was an adviser to a previous Secretary of State for the Environment. Is he now seriously saying that, in that capacity, he had nothing to do with the European directive?

Mr. Gray: I happily give the hon. Gentleman that assurance. I came into the then Department of the Environment some time after the directive was agreed, and some time after my boss—my right hon. Friend the Member for Suffolk, Coastal (Mr. Gummer)—became Secretary of State for the Environment. The directive was before his time. Nevertheless, he used to describe me as the grit in his oyster, as his views and mine on matters such as European directives were never in accord. Therefore, even if it had been agreed in his time, I am confident that I should have advised against its promulgation. However, that is delving into ancient history.

The general principle that I have described is a good one: we do not need a European directive to control how we deal with United Kingdom environmental pollution. We should also consider how the United Kingdom handles European directives. True Europeans—continental Europeans—do not deal with European directives as we do. When the French receive a directive, they shrug their shoulders, in a Gallic type of way, and put it on a shelf. The Germans know a great deal more about the matter than is described in the directive, and they have already implemented its contents. Therefore, there is no need for the Germans to worry about it. In the United Kingdom, however, my erstwhile colleagues—civil servants at the Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions—receive a European directive in the post, look at it, and create a gigantic library of regulations to attempt to implement it. They gold plate European directives most extraordinarily.

[Mr. Gray]

We have already heard in the debate details of how annexe 1 of the directive specifies the industries that should be regulated, and of how the Bill would quite significantly increase the number of industries that should be regulated.

I think of the water industry, with which I was very much involved when I worked in the Department of the Environment. Very properly, the urban waste water treatment directive provided that sewage outfalls should be controlled, and the previous Government went to great lengths to reduce sewage pollution in sea. Now, however, certain people—such as no less a body than Surfers Against Sewage—are making representations to the Government that ultraviolet screening of long sea sewage outfalls should be operated the whole year round. Doing so might seem sensible enough, until one realises that people surf only between about April and about October, and that ultraviolet screening is extraordinarily expensive. Operating year-round screening would be equivalent to gold plating the directive. I suspect that some of the proposals on implementing that directive are no more than gold plating.

Dr. Alan Whitehead (Southampton, Test): Has the hon. Gentleman ever heard of wetsuits?

Mr. Gray: I have indeed heard of wetsuits, and, when I go surfing in Cornwall, I wear one. However, wetsuits are not a factor in the comments of Surfers Against Sewage on ultraviolet treatment. Its members are saying that, despite wetsuits or any other personal protection, they want ultraviolet protection the whole year round, so that when they go surfing on Christmas day they will be protected. I think that the hon. Gentleman rather missed the point.

There are three ways of treating European directives. First, we could do what many of my colleagues in Government often did, who said, "We must be in the forefront in implementing the directives and show Europe how to do it. We're not going to gold plate them. We're going to deal with every issue and sort them all out. Look at us—aren't we great?"

The second way to treat European directives is how the French and Italians do it, by saying, "Who cares anyway? We'll just ignore them, and hope that no one will notice." Surely the sensible way is to be in the middle of the pack, conforming to most of the directive in good time and avoiding being taken to the European Court for failing to implement it, but not rushing forward. The Minister might like to think about clause 1, which takes the Bill significantly further than annexe 1 of the directive. I am concerned about the gold plating tendency of my worthy and distinguished former colleagues at the Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions.

My second concern is the effect that the Bill would have on businesses. We have already heard a great deal about the difference between BATNEEC and BAT. The Government have gone to some lengths here and in another place to say that there is not much difference. If that is the case, why have all the industries gone to such gigantic lengths to say that they are very concerned about the difference? They say that the measure is gold plating and will cost them a lot of money. They say that despite their best efforts the Government have not listened to a word that they have said.

In an intervention on my hon. Friend the Member for West Chelmsford (Mr. Burns), I quoted from a letter from the Federation of Small Businesses, which is very concerned that the Bill will put people out of business in my constituency. Its letter to the Government setting that out was not even acknowledged. The federation was out of the loop. The Minister said earlier that it was happy and that there was nothing in the Bill to cause small businesses difficulties. That is demonstrably not the case. I have extensive quotations from the Federation of Small Businesses saying the opposite. Small businesses are rightly worried.

The key to environmental legislation must be cost-benefit analysis. Many measures could be beneficial. We have heard from one hon. Member who wants ultraviolet screening on Christmas day on long sea sewage outfalls. We have to balance the benefits against the cost of implementing environmental legislation. The Bill fails to strike a sensible balance between cost and benefit.

Leaving that general concern about business to one side, I am particularly concerned about some specific industries. The Minister boldly says that he believes that the Bill will affect 6,000 installations rather than the 2,000 that are currently affected. That means that 4,000 installations will be brought under the regime. That rings large alarm bells. Many of those 4,000 businesses, farms and other installations across the country are no doubt in my constituency, although I do not know about them. They will suddenly be subject to regulation. We do not know what kind of regulation, because the Bill leaves it to the Secretary of State to decide that in the privacy of his office.

I am worried because I do not know the effects on some of the installations. We are told that 1,000 landfill sites and 1,000 pig and poultry farms will be covered. The Minister talked about very large pig and poultry farms, but a farm of 40,000 hens is a small to medium-sized farm. The Bill will cover all poultry farms except the very smallest. Any worthwhile poultry farm will be covered by the regulations. The Bill will also cover 500 food and drink factories that are not currently regulated. The other businesses affected are small businesses that are currently regulated by local authorities.

The Minister must tell us the environmental benefits of bringing those 4,000 businesses into regulation and the cost to them. He must not waft the issue away, telling us not to worry because this is a fearfully good environmental Bill and small businesses and farmers will be all right. We want to know the detailed benefits of the Bill and the costs to the industries that I have mentioned.

The landfill tax is increasing thanks to recent Budgets to discourage the use of landfill sites. That is fine, but if the Bill brings extra costs to bear on landfill sites there could be an increase in fly tipping. There have been 6,000 to 8,000 reported incidents of fly tipping across the nation.

Mrs. Gorman: Sixty thousand to 80,000.

Mr. Gray: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for correcting me. Those incidents are largely a result of the landfill tax. How much extra fly tipping will the Bill cause?

We would all like our rubbish to be incinerated rather than put in landfill sites. Will the Bill affect rubbish incineration sites? Will it affect waste-to-energy sites?

The Minister might like to consult his officials before he responds so that he can tell us whether they are included. If they are, he might like to tell us whether the regulations will make it easier or more difficult to set up a waste-to-electricity site.

In my rural constituency I am particularly concerned about farmers. I have several poultry farmers and a large number of pig farmers. Thanks to the Government's two years in office, my pig farmers are nearly all going out of business. Anyone who attended the Royal Bath and West show last week will know that—the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food was concerned by what he saw of the pig farmers. We have told our pig farmers to get rid of their stalls and tethers, their prices have gone through the floor, and they are worse off than European pig farmers and going bankrupt—and now we are going to regulate what they do with their pig dung and invite the local authority and people near the farm to tell us what they think about it. Those of us who are green and organic would much rather chicken and pig dung was used on the fields instead of fertilisers—although the Minister for the Environment may differ from that view—but it smells and attracts flies. If we invite every villager in the surrounding area to complain and use the legislation to stop the farmer from using dung, the cost of disposing of it and growing the produce in the fields where it is currently used will increase. The Bill will have a significant effect on pig and chicken farmers in my constituency and elsewhere. I do not believe that the Government have taken proper account of the damage that the Bill will do to them.

Small businesses have been mentioned a great deal during the debate. They concern us all, particularly the Conservatives, because we are the party of small businesses. The Minister has shown that the Government are not excessively concerned. Small businesses may be bad polluters individually, but the percentage of pollution that they produce collectively is relatively small. The Bill may bear down particularly heavily on small individual polluters, even though 70 per cent. of all pollution is produced by the chemical industry. The Minister might like to consult more fully with the Federation of Small Businesses on its concerns about the Bill. He might care to respond to the federation's submission before the Bill goes to Committee. In Committee he might like to find ways of addressing its reasonable worries.

I have concerns about the format of the Bill and its practical effects. It is easy to talk about it as a tidying-up measure. Throughout the debates in the other place, Lord Whitty consistently said that the Bill was a small administrative matter and the Government were tidying up so that we have one pollution control system instead of three. He told us not to worry, because it was just a small matter of implementing a European directive that the Government would get through on a one-line Whip on a quiet evening. Some 6,000 extra businesses will be covered. It is important to look carefully at what the Bill will mean to them.

This is a baby and bath water Bill. We want to know which babies will be thrown out with the bath water. Which babies are in the bath? Is the bath gold plated? The Minister is not listening, or he might appreciate my reference. We want to know what will happen. Which businesses will be terminally affected? Which pig farmers or chicken farmers—already on their uppers thanks to the Government—will go out of business as a result of the Bill? Above all, what will the Minister do to protect small businesses, to whose representations the Government have been notably reluctant to listen?

7.10 pm

Mr. Nick Ainger (West Carmarthen and South Pembrokeshire): I congratulate the Government on introducing the legislation. Throughout the 1990s, I have been involved in dealing with the effects of an application by National Power to burn orimulsion at Pembroke power station in my constituency. In an unconnected incident, the Sea Empress ran aground at the mouth of Milford Haven resulting in what is still the sixth worst oil pollution incident in the world. I therefore have some knowledge of pollution and integrated pollution control.

What followed the application by National Power was a model of how not to regulate the potential for pollution. In 1991, the company made an application to burn orimulsion at its then oil-burning power station. It finally withdrew the application, which had gone through various processes, in the summer of 1997, although no decision had been reached. The process probably cost the company in the region of £2 million to £3 million. The three local authorities involved also put in a great deal of expenditure and staff time.

The matter was originally dealt with by Her Majesty's inspectorate of pollution, which then became the Environment Agency. Obviously, massive amounts of staff time were devoted to the application. The Countryside Council for Wales was also heavily involved in respect of environmental impact, both marine and land. The Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food was also involved in respect of potential marine pollution resulting from the importation of orimulsion, and the Welsh Office was involved in planning and environmental protection matters.

Despite the involvement of all those agencies, no decision was reached. When, some six years after the original application, the Department of Trade and Industry decided—rightly, in my view—that there should be a public inquiry, the company decided to withdraw the application.

A holistic approach and a truly integrated system of pollution prevention and control are clearly needed. Although I take on board some of the comments made by Opposition Members about the Environmental Protection Act 1990, that measure did not deliver in respect of a large, complex and expensive project—it would have cost £500 million to convert Pembroke power station. When the directive is incorporated in British law, it will make the system more effective and efficient and I am sure business will welcome that.

I turn to the comments of Opposition Members, particularly in relation to competition. Again, I refer to National Power and its plan to burn orimulsion. What really annoyed National Power was the fact that PowerGen, its prime competitor in power generation in the United Kingdom, was burning orimulsion without any of the pollution controls that the Environmental Protection Agency would have imposed on National Power. The same applies to other industries that have not reached the same point in the integration of pollution control, particularly in continental Europe.

[Mr. Nick Ainger]

About a year ago I saw the pollution that was emitted by the refineries in Algeciras, in southern Spain. I do not know whether it was part of the Spanish Government's attitude to Gibraltar, but whenever I looked over at Algeciras, the pollution was blowing straight over Gibraltar. The refineries at Milford Haven in my constituency, where top-quality management insists on the highest environmental standards, are competing with refineries in Algeciras and elsewhere around the Mediterranean where there seem to be many old and rather dirty oil refineries which clearly have not made the same investments as British refineries. It is unfair competition.

The hon. Member for North Wiltshire (Mr. Gray) should realise that because the directive applies throughout Europe, it will improve the competitive position of British companies. I accept his point about Germany, but because we have made the necessary investment, we are very close to the German position in a number of respects. It is unfair that British companies, particularly in the oil refining and power generation industries, have to compete with refineries and power stations in continental Europe which have not implemented top-quality pollution controls.

Mr. Gray: I entirely agree with the hon. Gentleman about the offshore oil industry. What does he think about the pig industry, and the fact that stalls and tethers have been banned in the United Kingdom, but not in Europe? The Bill will drive our pig farmers out of business.

Mr. Ainger: No pig farmer has ever told me that the problems in the pig industry—which are cyclical, not structural—resulted from the banning of stall and tether. Like the hon. Gentleman, I represent a rural constituency where there are pig farmers, and none of them has made that point. There is a cyclical problem, which in many cases relates to overproduction, which in turn is creating difficulties for pig farmers. The animal welfare issues are not to blame.

Ms Glenda Jackson: I am sure that my hon. Friend is aware, even though the hon. Member for North Wiltshire (Mr. Gray) is not, that in respect of pigs and chickens there is a requirement to apply the integrated pollution prevention control directive that was brought into being by the former boss of the hon. Member for North Wiltshire, the right hon. Member for Suffolk, Coastal (Mr. Gummer). I am sure that my hon. Friend is aware that there are no proposals whatever to adopt lower thresholds than those in that directive.

Mr. Ainger: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for her clarification. I am sure that the hon. Member for North Wiltshire now accepts that.

I now move on to another part of the Bill and welcome the fact that we are to have truly integrated pollution prevention controls. The offshore installations around our coast were highlighted in Lord Donaldson's reports. The most recent one, with which I helped, covered major pollution incidents at sea. I welcome the fact that we shall now have proper controls covering pollution from offshore installations.

I am sure that my hon. Friends representing constituencies on the north Wales coast and the Wirral will join me in welcoming the measure. Over the past 18 months, their constituencies have suffered a series of pollution incidents involving the Broken Hill Petroleum Company, the old Hamilton Brothers Company, at its Liverpool bay installations. None of them were major incidents involving hundreds of tonnes, but they were significant enough to appear regularly in the media. Environmental pollution has a negative impact on the tourist areas along the coastal strip of north Wales, such as Colwyn Bay, Llandudno and Rhyl. It is vital that we have a regulatory framework to address the offshore industry, as offshore installations have not been covered by the 1990 legislation in the same way as onshore installations.

I welcome the fact that energy efficiency will become part of the holistic approach to pollution control. It is to the great credit of the Government that they are willing to take difficult decisions that many constituents do not like in relation to fuel duty and so on. However, that is part of the green agenda that we are implementing.

There is a need to ensure adequate monitoring of atmospheric and marine pollution. The technology is available to industry, which must get involved in research and development as well as marketing and producing. The major polluters of the atmospheric and marine environments need to be able to show the regulators that their permitted emissions are not being exceeded, either overall or on a peak basis.

This is an opportunity for small businesses—to which Tory Members keep referring—to get into the environmental monitoring industry, which is growing and is worth billions of pounds. I hope that the Bill will encourage more British companies to research and develop environmental monitoring equipment, and I welcome the Government's intention in proposing the Bill.

7.22 pm

Mr. Tom Brake (Carshalton and Wallington): I start by declaring an interest, in that I am a trustee of the Centre for Environmental Initiatives—an organisation in my constituency which does much work on environmental issues, both locally and nationally.

The Liberal Democrats welcome the Bill because we must strengthen pollution prevention and control in this country. However, the Bill is not perfect and further work will be needed on definitions, as was pointed out by the hon. Member for West Chelmsford (Mr. Burns). Should the definition of "harm" extend to offending the senses of human beings? That is worth revisiting. There may be legitimate concerns also about releasing the names and addresses of producers—again, something to which we may want to return. In Committee, we will table amendments to strengthen the Bill and to address some of its weaknesses. However, the Bill represents progress, and we shall give broad support to its principles.

We want to flesh out the detail of any proposed pollution inventories. The Labour party promised action in this area before the general election. The Minister for the Environment promised:

"Local Authorities will be responsible for a comprehensive Local Pollution Inventory detailing emissions of pollutants into air, water and ground in their area."

That promise has been repeated, most recently at the 1998 Labour party conference—still, I believe, the sovereign body of the Labour party—where the Minister said that he wanted

"a toxic releases inventory of all noxious discharges to land, air and water in their neighbourhood to be readily available for public inspection by local people."

The principle of pollution inventories is supported by the Environment Agency, which recently stated that

"a truly comprehensive pollution inventory would contain information on all sources of pollution in a local area",

particularly associated with landfill sites and sewage works. The agency believes, as do the Liberal Democrats, that an amendment to the Bill would be the most effective way of achieving that.

There is broad support for the concept of pollution inventories among industrialists. The business and environment director of the UK Chemical Industries Association said that if the Government proposed a comprehensive inventory, the association would give that its wholehearted support. My hon. Friend the Member for Truro and St. Austell (Mr. Taylor) has tabled an early-day motion calling for pollution inventories, which has been supported by no fewer than 194 Members of Parliament. I hope that others will support it in the days and weeks to come.

My hon. Friend's Access to Environmental Information Bill is what is needed. The crucial difference is that people have a right to know about dangerous pollutants emitted from sources in their area. That is where the protection of the environment and freedom of information combine—something to which the Liberal Democrats are committed. My hon. Friend's Bill, supported by Members from both sides of the House, would deliver that.

It is appropriate that we are discussing the Bill today, as we prepare to go to the polls for elections to the European Parliament. The window of opportunity for the Bill came with the integrated pollution prevention and control directive. That is a good thing that has come out of Europe—I hope that all hon. Members can agree on that. That is why my party has taken a positive line on Europe—a firm but fair line. It is not possible for this country to have a pristine environment if a reactor in France fails, if Germany pollutes the air or if everybody else destroys the oceans. As others have pointed out, environmental pollution does not respect national boundaries.

Anybody arguing for a weaker Europe, or for this country to go it alone, must realise that that has knock-on effects on issues such as the environment. Only with a strong Europe—working on environmental issues and taking tough decisions on the world stage—can we hope to see action on the scale that is so desperately needed to ensure that our environment is safe. A weaker Europe equals weaker environmental protection for all. Perhaps the Tories' campaign slogan should be, "Not in Europe, but polluted by Europe". The Liberal Democrats are proud, as environmentalists, to be strong supporters of a more open, more democratic, reformed and more sustainable EU.

The Liberal Democrats often criticise the Secretary of State for taking powers that we believe to be unnecessary. However, in this case, I hope that Ministers will assure the House that it is the Secretary of State's intention to use the powers available to him—selectively, of course, as many Members have raised concerns about the far-reaching nature of some of the powers. I would like an indication that the Secretary of State would be willing to use the powers where necessary—a point made by the hon. Member for Stoke-on-Trent, North (Ms Walley).

We do not want to spend hours debating a Bill upon which, in the end, the Secretary of State has no intention of acting. I do not believe that that is the intention, but I hope that Ministers will confirm that the Government will use such powers, which powers they intend using and whether there is an outline timetable for when that will be done.

The Access to Environmental Information Bill is a way forward which, eventually, I believe will be agreed in this House. However, the Liberal Democrats are realists and, in the spirit of constructive opposition which characterises my party's positive and sensible approach to politics, I have another proposal.

I wrote recently to the Minister for the Environment to ask him to consider amendments which many hon. Members will have seen, as they were circulated by Friends of the Earth. I have not had a response, and I would be grateful if the Under-Secretary would respond on his behalf when she winds up. The amendments are non-controversial and I hope that the Government will support them—or table them themselves—in Committee.

The amendments would enable better information to be provided to the public on environmental pollution. That would not require the Secretary of State to take action, but it would give him the ability to do so in line with the enabling nature of the Bill. He will be able to collect pollution data from a variety of sources—landfill sites, factories, sewage treatment works and so on. That information could be made readily available to local people. That is what we want, what I believe Ministers want and what many other groups and organisations want.

An effective consensus has been reached in favour of such a measure, and I hope that the Minister will not disappoint us in her reply. In the meantime, we support the Bill as a first step in the right direction.

7.30 pm

Mr. Patrick Hall (Bedford): I, too, believe that it is timely that we should debate this matter today, only two days before the European parliamentary elections. As my right hon. Friend the Minister said, the Bill stems from the need to implement next year the European directive on integrated pollution prevention and control. That is another excellent example of the benefits of being in Europe and of being positive about it.

Contrary to the assertions of foreign imposition and domination made by the hon. Member for North Wiltshire (Mr. Gray), the directive is very much influenced by the United Kingdom's system of integrated pollution control, which is site specific and based on permits, in contrast with the more general countrywide and inflexible controls favoured by many other member states. The European Council has listened to our arguments.

I understand that a significant proportion of the staff at the European Union's integrated pollution prevention and control bureau, which is preparing guidance on these matters for all member states, have been seconded from the Environment Agency for England and Wales. That is an example of positive international co-operation and

[Mr. Patrick Hall]

shows how we can be constructive and helpful about Europe, and thus exert significant influence on measures that will benefit not only us, but all of Europe. In an election week, it must be said that that is in sharp contrast to the essentially anti-European position of too many Conservative Members.

I agree with my hon. Friend the Member for Stoke-on-Trent, North (Ms Walley) that, although the constitutional and procedural matters raised in great detail in another place are important, by concentrating only on those, the hon. Member for West Chelmsford (Mr. Burns) gave the impression of a somewhat negative approach to the Bill. He could have said a little more about the positive aspects of pollution control, raising standards for people in this country and throughout the European Union.

Mr. Burns: The responsibility of the official Opposition is to oppose those parts of legislation that we feel are not particularly good or need improving. I made it plain that, in principle, I support the aims of the Bill, because it is based on a directive to which the Conservative Government signed up, but our role is to find and draw attention to areas where we believe it is not ideal.

Mr. Hall: I look forward to positive and constructive interventions from Conservative Members in Committee.

It is widely understood that pollution does not respect international boundaries. It is a global issue and we clearly have to co-operate. The directive is an example of working together for common goals and the common good. It is also an example, in this election week, of the effective stewardship of the British people's interests delivered by the Government's leadership and competence in Europe. We are being listened to in Europe because we are positive about our engagement in Europe.

The directive, usefully, goes further than the UK system of integrated pollution control by requiring energy efficiency and noise to be considered as well as emissions. That is a welcome and important step forward. That good practice is already followed by many organisations and firms in this country, but it is important to set higher minimum standards. The Bill is extremely positive in that respect.

Mr. Gray: I was not being in the slightest bit anti-European. I was merely asking why we need a directive to implement such measures. What are the trans-boundary implications of noise pollution?

Mr. Hall: It depends on how loud the noise is. I hope that, if he serves on the Bill in Committee, the hon. Gentleman will make quiet but constructive noises that will be welcomed by our friends in Europe.

The directive and the Bill lay emphasis on installations, as opposed to the British system, which emphasises processes. That will be helpful. The scope of integrated pollution prevention will be widened to include landfill sites, which will be very welcome to my constituents in Bedford and Kempston, given their proximity to the brick clay pits, which are some of the biggest holes in the ground in this country. Some are still active, but the exhausted pits present a potential resource, including that used by the existing huge landfill operation, which deals with domestic and industrial waste, including some extremely toxic materials.

Large food and drink factories and intensive pig and poultry farms will be regulated, as will sewage works, which are frequently a source of local environmental concern. The Bill presents a common system, unifying the European IPPC directive, the UK system and the local air pollution system operated by local council environmental health departments. Many will welcome the idea of a unified, integrated system.

Will my hon. Friend the Minister expand a little further—in Committee, if not tonight—on those three strands? How can a common system work effectively and seamlessly, given that it will be operated nationally by the Environment Agency and locally by hundreds of authorities covering thousands of installations? There are resourcing and communication issues, and we need to ensure consistency between what is done in accordance with the same legislation by different organisations at different levels. That is a crucial question.

The Bill provides an excellent opportunity to deliver something that is crucial to an environmentally sustainable future: the empowerment of all citizens by making it possible easily to obtain clear information about pollution affecting them where they live. That should include information on health outcomes and hazards.

Just as democracy cannot be left only to politicians, so must care for the environment and respect for the planet not be left only to the experts. Of course we need experts' advice and the public must be kept informed, but to achieve really high environmental standards and to reduce or even eliminate pollution wherever possible, the concern and participation of the public are essential. Children are very keen on these matters and by being able to get information adults, too, will be able to contribute more effectively.

I warmly welcome the Government's commitment to comprehensive pollution inventories. Two welcome initiatives have already been introduced this year: the factory watch initiative from Friends of the Earth and the pollution inventory launched by the Environment Agency last month. Both those initiatives will enable the public to get information through the internet about their local environment, but they have only just got under way and there are some limitations. For example, the health threat data that Friends of the Earth have been using is questioned by some. It is based on US definitions, but the principle of having information about health outcomes and hazards is very important, and that work should be continued and strengthened.

The pollution inventory from the Environment Agency is currently restricted to the processes that the agency is able to cover under the regulations, although the scope will be widened. The biggest local source of pollution is usually road traffic, which is not included, but should be; nor are landfill and sewage works, but they will be if the Bill becomes law, as we hope. Indeed, the agency's press release of 12 May says that its wish to expand the pollution inventory to create a truly comprehensive service could be achieved by an amendment to the Bill. I am sure that that issue will be carefully considered in Committee; the hon. Member for Carshalton and Wallington (Mr. Brake) promised to raise it. He

mentioned the fact that local councils will have an important role also, and I hope that my hon. Friend the Minister will make some encouraging and instructive remarks about how that area can be developed.

It is important that we make progress in trying to reduce pollution at source. It is also important that we hold the polluter to account. We should recognise that pollution from industrial processes has been reduced in recent years, but we should not take that for granted. There is still a long way to go, and a recent article in *The Observer* revealed that some parts of the country suffer from releases of high levels of cancer-causing chemicals, dioxins and other toxic waste.

The Bill could help to drive standards up and to push pollution down. To do that, it must embrace the measurement of road traffic pollution. It should require a national pollution inventory to empower the public which is not diluted by unreasonable considerations of commercial confidentiality. It must also include the means to set serious targets, which are important if we are to make progress. We must not stay where we are or take what has happened for granted.

The Bill can help to create the conditions to build a body of good practice and high technological competence so that Britain becomes a centre of excellence. It is appropriate that the birthplace of the industrial revolution should become the place where some of the unacceptable consequences of industrialisation are effectively tackled. We should build up a body of research and information for the benefit of the planet. That will benefit this country and the European Union, and will have tremendous international implications. The Bill has great potential and I welcome it.

7.44 pm

Mrs. Teresa Gorman (Billericay): The environment is one of the most fashionable causes of the past few decades. It has spawned masses of sacred cows which are trotted out whenever the Government look for a cause that might rouse public concern and interest. It has created many scares, which are good for publicity for the pressure groups, such as Friends of the Earth and Greenpeace, and for businesses such as Ecologika—I shall talk later about how it operates in my constituency—which get fees from other organisations and the Government to tackle problems that often turn out not to be problems after all.

The Bill is designed to appeal to those people who have been, to some extent, taken in by the green lobby. In many cases, people's concerns have been raised needlessly. The Labour party promised those people a clean earth at the election to obtain their votes, but the Government have failed to deliver. They went overboard to secure the green lobby's votes. The tobacco lobby is another good example. The Labour party promised to ban tobacco advertising, only to modify the legislation and to excuse one of the major tobacco advertisers when it came into office.

The concept behind the Bill is riddled with contradictions and anomalies. The Government wish to call a halt to the dash for gas, which will mean more coal pollution, but the gases produced by coal pollution are much more dangerous to the environment than those caused by more efficient fuels, such as gas. If we are serious about reducing pollution, we should realise that atomic energy produces fuel in a much cleaner and greener way, although the Labour party would never dream of that solution. The Government's idea of alternative fuel is wind farms, which pollute the visual environment with ghastly concrete fins. The energy produced is accompanied by a horrible screeching, which is a noise pollutant for those who live nearby. Furthermore, the production of wind energy is so uneconomic that the whole wretched business has to be heavily subsidised by Government grants. That is the sort of ridiculous situation that the Government are in as a result of the anomalies and contradictions in their approach.

Landfill sites will get some more attention. The hon. Member for Bedford (Mr. Hall) claimed to represent the landfill site of the nation, but I challenge that. The area that I represent is full of landfill sites. They are smelly, and the flies are so bad in the summer that people living within a mile or more cannot open their windows. The sites spawn rats, mice, sparrows and huge flocks of seagulls which, having fed on a mish-mash of domestic waste, leave their droppings on people's washing. The droppings are full of salmonella and other bacteria. However, the Government oppose the sensible alternative of incineration. They have come up with the fanciful idea that we can recycle everything, but goodness knows where all that recycling is to take place.

The ideas behind the Bill do not deal with realities. The Bill is an attempt to appease a particular group of the population whom the Government kidded to vote for them on the ground that they would produce magical results in environmental improvement. The Government are also leaning on the wretched European directive, which will mean more powers for agencies to bear down on small and large businesses alike. When businesses are forced to implement standards that are inappropriate and expensive, the costs are passed on to the consumer.

There is no such thing as a free environmental improvement measure. All such measures add to costs, both domestic and industrial. It is laughable to suggest that all Europe will abide by regulations such as those that appear in the Bill, and thus improve the competitiveness of our industries.

Mr. Harry Barnes (North-East Derbyshire): A firm in my constituency—Biwaters—offers an example of how competitiveness can be improved by getting rid of various forms of pollution. That firm was under much pressure because of the pollution that it was causing in the area. When it expanded, it agreed to provisions to ensure that the pollution did not continue. The result was that growth brought more employment to the area, wealth and opportunities were created, and pollution was reduced. So there is no trade-off between pollution and cost.

Mrs. Gorman: The hon. Gentleman's example merely shows that our current system is working. The firm in his constituency was able to expand and ended up improving its methods to deal with waste. The previous Government used the polluter pays principle to improve the disposal of industrial waste, and it has worked well.

I wish that Labour Members would not always rubbish our country and the improvements that have taken place. I do not know how many of them have been on parliamentary trips to inspect other parts of the world, but anyone who has been to Mexico will know that the air

[Mrs. Gorman]

there is not breathable and makes one pass out for the first few days. This country's air has been improved out of all recognition, without European directives. We have some of the best air in the world.

We keep on hearing about pollution from motor cars, but new cars produce almost no exhaust particulates. They do produce carbon dioxide, but the total amount of that gas produced by all forms of transport amounts to only 1 per cent. of all the carbon dioxide in our atmosphere. Incidentally, only 0.5 per cent. of that total is produced by cars. If we took every car and lorry off the road tomorrow, the difference in the amount of carbon dioxide in the atmosphere would be infinitesimal.

The Bill will allow the Government to intensify policies that, eventually, will render our car industry almost non-existent. The industry cannot keep up with the demands that the Government place on it. Safety requirements mean that cars have to be bigger and heavier, and thus consume more petrol, whereas the requirement to reduce carbon dioxide output serves little purpose, as it is not a serious problem.

The Bill will not prevent the large environmental disasters that, regrettably, occur from time to time. Such disasters include accidents at nuclear power plants which, although very regrettable, are rare, given the number of such plants around the world. Nor will the Bill prevent what happened when vessels such as the Torrey Canyon or the Exxon Valdez ran aground, or the pollution that afflicted the Welsh coast. Such incidents are due to human error, which cannot be eliminated by a measure such as this. The powers that the Bill will give the Government will not stop those regrettable, but unfortunate incidents.

I want to pay special attention to the question of landfill sites, which is of particular importance in my constituency. That matter has been mentioned several times already, and is a feature of the Bill. Landfill sites are unpleasant places, but their lifespan is to be reduced and no more will be introduced. Three cheers for that, although the process of phasing out landfill sites is not the result of Labour Government legislation, but has been taking place for some time. However, the alternatives are completely unrealistic. I urge the Government to consider the need to incinerate more of our domestic waste, thus producing energy. Domestic waste can be regarded as a form of biomass, and incinerating it will remove several other pollutants that are in too great abundance.

I seriously object to the fact that, although the Bill will lead to more regulation and add to the costs of industry, it will not make much difference to the environment. The Government have shown that they will slip out of obligations when it suits them, and the smoking pollution to which I referred earlier is one example of their duplicity. Nor will they deal sensibly with the problem of traffic congestion, a matter over which they have hoodwinked the public. The Government are torn between appeasing the motorist and keeping the green lobby happy.

How can congestion be cured without increasing the number of roads and bypasses, and without increasing funding? It is bizarre to suppose that new European regulations, which allow giant European lorries and more heavy goods vehicles on our roads, will help matters. Many of my constituents live up country lanes, along which relatively small lorries used to bring waste to be dumped. Now, the waste comes in enormous vehicles that destroy the hedgerows. Vibrations from those vehicles cause serious problems to building foundations. Any legislation that allows agencies to produce more madcap schemes is thoroughly bad. I hope that, in Committee, we shall hear some sensible, practical examples of how the effect of legislation can be the opposite of what was intended.

I am uneasy about the reality of improving the environment. Making people pay for the pollution that they produce is admirable, and has produced enormous benefits and great improvements in the way in which industry deals with its waste. The previous Government supported that approach, and that is the way we should go. We should not introduce legislation that bends to the fashionable environmentalist lobbies, whose views are often based on nonsensical and bizarre interpretations of science which will not produce the results that they intend.

7.58 pm

Dr. Doug Naysmith (Bristol, North-West): Unlike the hon. Member for Billericay (Mrs. Gorman), I support the Bill, which I believe offers the possibility of a big step forward in the way that we manage pollution prevention and control in this country and elsewhere in Europe, as similar legislation is being introduced throughout the European Union.

If one reads the background to the Bill and the discussions that have been held elsewhere on its provisions, it is clear that there have been substantial changes since it began its progress on 26 November last year. There is no doubt, either, that the wide consultations that have been held since July 1997, when the first consultation paper on implementing the European directive was issued, have also helped.

Of course, in most respects the Bill is concerned with a series of fairly dry, technical matters involving an abundance of off-putting acronyms and jargon. Even so, it is widely considered that the fairly substantial changes that have been made have improved the Bill.

I have a real interest in pollution control matters as my constituency contains a substantial concentration of industries that are potential polluters. It includes representatives of power generation, metal processing, mineral industries, the chemical industry, waste disposal and numerous other industries. The Severnside area also acts as an economic generator for the whole of the greater Bristol region, and underpins many of the jobs in that area. It is therefore vital that any new legislation strikes the right balance between protecting the health of the local people and the environment, without imposing unnecessary burdens on industry which could lead to it becoming uncompetitive.

The Bill strikes that balance. The decision not to introduce new legislation to run alongside existing legislation was wise. I know that people to whom I have spoken who are concerned with industry on Severnside would much prefer a one-stop-shop approach instead of having to deal with a number of different agencies. The existing overlap of permissions will also be aided by the new requirements to deal with whole installations rather than individual processes on a single site.

I have also discussed the proposed new legislation with the health and environmental services department of Bristol city council, which favours the integrated

approach that is being adopted. In particular, the council is pleased with the possibility of organising processes to achieve the aim of sustainable development. The directive on integrated pollution prevention and control presents a huge opportunity to break the cycle of industrial land contamination. Requirements to avoid pollution risks, and to return sites to a satisfactory state when an installation closes permanently, must be included in the IPPC permits. That would not only ensure that the polluter pays for any remedial work, but that there was an incentive to manage processes so that contamination was avoided.

In a sense, the consumption of raw materials and energy is at the heart of sustainable development, and the way in which different business sectors respond to that pressure will be the key to future success. The Bill's proposals may help to influence the culture of industrial investment in the UK, which is traditionally short term in comparison with the longer-term view of some competitor nations. Encouragement of better energy efficiency will be a new responsibility for local authorities in this context and may not be easy to enforce. Measuring emissions may be child's play by comparison, but if sensible agreements can be reached, the effort will be worth while.

The EU directive and the Bill also emphasise noise prevention and reduction in an industrial setting, and that, too, marks an advance in treating noise pollution in a manner similar to that employed for other emissions for control purposes. I understand that there is currently some sort of turf war between local authorities and the Environment Agency about who should have the last word, but once that has been resolved, nothing but good can come.

I welcome the unifying and simplifying aspects of the Bill, and I understand that the Confederation of British Industry, local authorities and the Chartered Institute of Environmental Health do too. That is an unusual combination, but it provides some measure of the broad support for the Bill.

8.3 pm

Mr. Bob Blizzard (Waveney): My constituents will welcome the Bill. Even Britain's most easterly constituency is part of the UK, of Europe and of the world. We share a common interest in preventing environmental damage in pursuit of a sustainable future. Pollution is the sharp end of environmental damage and dealing effectively with it must be at the heart of any environmental policy. I am pleased that the Bill emphasises the reality that pollution—particularly of the air and of water—respects and recognises no national boundaries. Flows of air and water do not stop at border controls.

It is important to give force to the Europe-wide directive, and it is fitting to do so in the week of the elections to the European Parliament. Our approach must be integrated across the countries of Europe. Everyone must sign up to the same standards, and enforce them to the same degree. The European Union has the tasks of ensuring that standards are enforced to the same degree in every country, and of showing that that is so. Many people in the UK are still convinced that other countries do not enforce standards to the same degree as we do. I do not know whether those allegations are true, but the belief is commonly held, and the EU must address it so that we may all be confident that regulations are equally enforced. We need higher standards across the EU, and a level playing field on which our businesses can compete.

Integration is also important to the approaches taken by individual Governments towards addressing the various forms of pollution, the regulations that govern operators, and the Government machinery for enforcement of regulations. If all that is integrated, we shall have an effective system that businesses involved can cope with and manage.

I want to focus on the relationship between environmental management and economic well-being, particularly as it affects my constituency. Waveney has particular reasons for welcoming improvements in the tackling of pollution. First, we are a coastal constituency, and tourism forms a major part of our economy. We have many attractions, but the basis of our tourism is clean beaches, clean sea water and clean rivers in the Broads national park. I am proud that since 1988 we have attained 51 beach awards and 13 European blue flags. Lowestoft was voted the best beach in the country by the English Tourist Board in 1991, and it still holds the title because the competition has not been run since then. More than 4,000 jobs are involved in tourism, and we have a clear interest in preventing pollution of our oceans and the North sea.

In 1978, an oil tanker shed some of its load, causing oil sludge on our beaches in north and south Lowestoft. A clean and healthy marine environment is also a necessity for good fisheries. Preventing pollution in seas around the country would be good for our fishing industry, which is particularly important to Lowestoft. Despite the gloom and doom we hear about fishing, I believe that we have a bright and sustainable future. Our main company has invested £3 million in a new trawler, which it would not have done unless it believed it had a future. The Bill will help to ensure that fish [illegible]ed in our marine environment.

When we implement environmental regulations, it is important to ensure that affected industries can adjust to change. We cannot afford to destroy businesses along the way. Let me offer a brief example that is currently causing concern. Anglian Water is implementing a current European directive, and Lowestoft fish merchants are concerned about what is happening in Grimsby.

My hon. Friend the Member for Great Grimsby (Mr. Mitchell) has brought to the attention of my right hon. Friend the Minister for the Environment the fact that fish merchants face an increase in their sewage bills of 1,000 per cent. because of the way in which Anglian Water is implementing the directive. No business can cope with that, and my fish merchants are worried because a new sewage treatment plant is coming and they may be faced with the same problem in a year or two's time. A means must be found of managing the change, and I hope that my hon. Friend and my right hon. Friend can find a way to resolve the situation. If they cannot, people at the Lowestoft fish market, on which our economy is heavily dependent, will continue to be worried.

That example illustrates the need to gain environmental advances without economic disbenefits, particularly in areas of high unemployment. Hon. Members who have studied the league table of unemployment in travel-to-work areas will know that a large number of coastal towns appear among the worst 20 areas.

My constituency has jobs in tourism and fishing. Another major source of employment is the offshore oil and gas industry, as is the case in several other towns

[Mr. Bob Blizzard]

around the coast. Therefore, we must carefully consider how the Bill relates to that important source of employment with its 350,000 jobs nationally, and given the 16 per cent. of industrial investment that it makes.

The industry has stated up front that it wants to play its part in developing an expanding environmental regime for offshore operations in partnership with the Government. It does not wish to run away from environmental responsibility. Indeed, during this debate I managed to take part in a meeting upstairs where the Minister for Energy and Industry was discussing that matter. He said that since he has been in office the industry has taken action in advance of legislation, which shows its attitude.

However, I wish to bring one or two concerns to the attention of the House. One concern is the means by which we reach the desired ends. Offshore installations vary because of geographical strata, technology, infrastructure and so forth. When trying to reach those ends, it is important that we consider installations on a site-by-site basis and recognise that different provisions should be made for different cases in relation to persons, circumstances, areas or locality.

I was heartened by the Minister's remarks on that subject at the beginning of the debate, when he mentioned flexibility and approaching matters on a site-by-site basis. We have to meet the desired ends, but there are different ways of doing so. We do not want the blanket application of specific technologies. There will be different solutions for different installations to reach those ends and that must be an important aim for the Government.

My second worry concerns the dreadful acronyms involved and the fact that BAT, or best available techniques, is to replace BATNEEC—best available technology without entailing excessive costs. The remarks of the noble Lord Whitty in another place and of the Minister this evening are heartening. They have confirmed that costs will form part of the new BAT regime, but it would be helpful if the Minister could make that absolutely clear when summing up. It will take away some of the worries and fears if, when seeking the best available technological solutions, we have regard to cost and the fact that it will not be excessive.

One cost with which offshore installations will have to deal is that of emissions from offshore combustion units. That will form part of the estimated additional £300 million that the industry feels the Bill will cost it. The industry questions one aspect that is related to combustion units and whether the cost involved will bring about significant improvements. A recent study carried out by the Norwegians—who, as we know, have a good environmental record—concluded that

"the environmental effects from combustion units in the North Sea do not pose a significant risk to populations or the environment."

That study was carried out in March 1999 and was called "The Contribution to Nitrogen Deposition and Ozone Formation in South Norway from Atmospheric Emission Related to the Petroleum Activity in the North Sea." It showed that emissions from the British and Norwegian sectors

"contribute less than 5 per cent. each of the measured . . . values for coniferous trees during the growth season."

If we are to compare emissions from combustion units with those from coniferous trees we must think seriously. I am not that familiar with the study and I do not understand all the science behind it, but that is a point worthy of consideration.

In searching for better environmental standards, we must always ensure that we get the best bang for our buck, to use the slang expression—that we make the most difference environmentally for the costs that will be incurred. Furthermore, in the consultation papers an appeals system was outlined for the onshore sector, but was apparently not suggested for the offshore sector in the Department of Trade and Industry paper. Natural justice would suggest that there ought to be an appeals procedure for that sector, too.

These are important matters for the British offshore oil and gas industry. The remarkable thing about that industry is that it is still here. Twenty years ago, people said that we would have run out of oil and gas by now, or that it would no longer be viable to extract it. The industry is still here because costs have been reduced so that marginal fields can be exploited. We need to get the cost balance right so that we can continue to exploit the resources that are left for 30 years or more. Now, 60 per cent. of the operation in the North sea involves gas, which is a relatively environmentally friendly fuel. It is important that we are able to extract and use up all or most of that gas—that finite and valuable resource—while the infrastructure is there. It would be very good environmental husbandry to take out that gas while we are able to do so, and that is why we need to consider costs alongside the important environmental advances that the industry also agrees need to be made.

8.15 pm

Mr. David Drew (Stroud): So much has already been said in the debate, which is coming to an end, so I hope not to re-rehearse the arguments. However, having been able to listen to so much of the debate, I want to pick up on certain points, even if somewhat briefly.

The Bill is important because it dwells on the vital subject of pollution, which affects us all in one way or another. The underlying principles of the Bill were well rehearsed by the Labour party when in opposition, but it is worth reinforming and reinforcing them. To start with, we have the precautionary principle, which is so important in its own right. We also have the principle that the polluter pays. Both are integral to any legislation that deals with pollution. We can underline those with the principle of transparency and, in particular, the predilection to inform and keep records, to which hon. Members on both sides of the House have referred. Linked to that principle is the increasing awareness of the relevance of participation and, certainly, consultation.

All those are important principles and they have produced legislation that I hope will be supported by hon. Members on both sides of the House—one would hope that no one will vote against it. Interestingly, the Conservative Front-Bench spokesman rightly said that a Conservative Government were responsible for passing the directive—the Bill is very much an enhancement of that directive—but his argument was kicked to pieces on the Conservative Back Benches and I know not why.

I am genuinely pleased to see the hon. Member for North Wiltshire (Mr. Gray) in his place. I have always found him to be sound on environmental matters, if not

so sound on agriculture, where we may disagree on some of the antecedents of various features affecting agricultural Britain at present. However, he made a pretty negative speech about the Bill. I thought that he would be genuinely in favour of some of the improvements and enhancements in it.

Mr. Gray: I was trying to point out, perhaps not expertly, that unlike the Millbank tower-controlled drones on the Labour side, we Conservative Members are able to express our own views. My view is that we in the United Kingdom apply the highest possible environmental standards. Therefore, why should it be necessary for us to pay lip service to a European directive to achieve what we are already achieving? I made that point to the hon. Member for Stoke-on-Trent, North (Ms Walley).

Mr. Drew: I thank the hon. Gentleman for that intervention. In many respects, the way in which we approach the subject may be laudable, but anyone who has an interest in it—I imagine that all hon. Members have—can recall instances where that has not always been the case. In considering some of the issues that have been raised in the debate, I hope, in a roundabout way, to show that we can always improve and extend our provision and that we can always learn, dare I say it, from examples in other parts of the world where things are not necessarily being done better, but differently.

The hon. Member for Billericay (Mrs. Gorman), who is not in her place, asked whether we are driving our motor car industry out of existence. I do not think that we are, but some important driving factors come from the United States, where compliance standards are being ratcheted up greatly. They may have different views about congestion costs, but they are worried about the environmental consequences of vehicles whose emissions are too high. We can always learn from abroad and ensure that we are willing to take things forward.

Hon. Members have asked why we need to move to BAT when we have BATNEEC. In a previous life as a councillor, I got well used to BATNEEC. The derogatory reference to it as catnip was interesting. I am not sure what that stands for, but I think that it means that people do what they need to do to avoid prosecution, rather than doing what they should do. My experience of BATNEEC was that it did not work in the most extreme cases. Local authority environmental health officers were often unable to pursue companies.

One case springs to mind. It was understood that companies could introduce a new form of technology involving a centrifuge to remove the residue, which they were putting into the atmosphere, of a nasty green powder. To be fair, the companies themselves thought that, but they kept saying that they could not afford it. It went on year after year. The next-door neighbour was a resident—there were also businesses nearby—who kept demanding that the change be made, but it never quite happened. If we can define BAT more carefully, some instances where an improvement is promised but not delivered could be avoided.

According to Opposition Members, we are anti small business—if not anti business—in the way in which we are making the changes, but one of the biggest gainers is small business. I regularly get complaints from small businesses about how business treats them with regard to pollution. Without naming or shaming, I have a case involving a large depot that has a poor record on oil spillage, which directly affects a market garden and a smallholding next door. The neighbours have regularly pursued the matter with the Environment Agency and I am pleased that we seem to be getting somewhere. It is naive to think that small business does not have a view or regards this only as a cost when it can see the benefits in cases where they are affected by the often deplorable behaviour of other businesses. I shall qualify this point in a moment, but while business wants a level playing field and fairness, it also wants to know that the costs of regulation are not being introduced in an unprecedented or unfair manner.

Mr. Gray: Small businesses that suffer pollution from big business will of course wholeheartedly favour big business being controlled. However, the Federation of Small Businesses, which speaks for small business across the nation, has made it 100 per cent. plain that it opposes the Bill because it will damage small businesses. How can the hon. Gentleman argue that the Bill, which brings 2,000 small businesses into the control mechanism, is good for small business?

Mr. Drew: I am not sure whether the hon. Gentleman heard what I said. Of course regulation implies that there may be additional costs, but businesses that are being unduly affected by the behaviour of other businesses will favour the changes. His point did not come up in my consultations with the Federation of Small Businesses locally. There may be a time lag and small businesses may not be sure about what regulations are coming, but I believe that they will welcome what they see as a fair and just system. People who break the regulations should be pursued and the polluter should pay. That cannot be done without regulation. Without it, this policy would be empty gestures, hot air and rhetoric. It is wrong to say that small business opposes the measure. It will see the benefits when clear offenders are dealt with.

I welcome the inclusion of energy efficiency. I hope that we are moving towards examining standard assessment procedures and how we assess building regulations so that we can improve the quality of our stock to ensure that we get the benefit of not allowing energy to escape through walls or roofs. Greater care should be taken in respect of noise pollution, which affects many more people than is often thought.

There is also the question of moving ecological management forward with, for example, EMAS—ecological management auditing systems—schemes. The hon. Member for Billericay may not like some of what is happening, but there is a spirit of enterprise and of wanting to do things better. That can all come together to make our world a better place to live in and to enable business to make a profit through its enterprising activities.

The qualifications that I want to make are not radically different from those of the hon. Member for West Chelmsford (Mr. Burns). Like him, I have been contacted by the National Farmers Union and the Country Landowners Association. We need some clarification on where we are with the directive. I am sure that that will come in Committee, although the Minister may want to allude to it now. Is annexe 1 the way to curtail regulation, or will we go beyond that? There is always an argument about what constitutes harm and how to redefine that.

[Mr. Drew]

With those qualifications, I welcome this excellent Bill. I hope that it gets a fair wind tonight so that all its principles can be implemented.

8.27 pm

Mr. Harry Barnes (North-East Derbyshire): The hon. Member for North Wiltshire (Mr. Gray) obviously made an impression because he has been mentioned by several Labour Members. I will be no exception because I want to refer to his analysis of European directives. He said that there were three ways in which the nations of the European Union could respond to directives. They could respond enthusiastically, as he felt that we did in the United Kingdom; they could ignore the directives, as tended to happen in Italy; or, as he favoured, they could drag their feet by doing only enough to avoid prosecution. That seems to be a strange attitude to adopt towards an organisation with which we are supposed to be associated.

The hon. Gentleman hit on a fourth possibility when he suggested that the Germans did not need to do any of those things because—he claimed—they were already operating the directives and therefore we were adopting their ideas. In fact, the Bill contains a fifth position, because it not only adopts a Council directive, it goes considerably beyond that, which is one of the most exciting things about the Bill. Even the long title of the Bill refers to

"otherwise preventing and controlling pollution".

It goes beyond the provisions in the Council's directives. That is explained in clause 1(1)(b) and (c), which refer to

"regulating, otherwise than in pursuance of that Directive, activities which are capable of causing any environmental pollution;"

and

"otherwise preventing or controlling emissions capable of causing any such pollution."

There are a series of definitions that add to those provisions and show that the Bill contains serious measures to try to tackle pollution. The method by which that will be done is set out in the regulation provisions in clause 2. Some people are entirely anti-regulation; we have heard some speeches to that effect, such as the one from the hon. Member for Billericay (Mrs. Gorman). Other people are much more favourable to regulation; they realise the problems of bureaucracy and want to control it, but they believe that fair regulation systems can operate.

The position of the official Opposition was given by the hon. Member for West Chelmsford (Mr. Burns), who is sitting on the Opposition Front Bench. He said that we could evade the regulations by having the measures clearly set out in the Bill, so that it explained the type of matters that would be dealt with. The problem faced by the Government in introducing the measure is the complexity of environmental protection and how to handle it. For example, in relation to dioxins, only one criterion is set down for unacceptable levels of dioxin—that is for dioxin in water. Apart from that, there are various examples of levels that people judge create dangers and difficulties and on which action is needed. In those circumstances, it would be difficult to introduce measures—the legislation would be massive—that tried to set out every level that had to be adhered to, every provision and every complex arrangement that would have to be made in one firm, so that it could establish the difficulties that it faced and so that the provisions for action in the Bill's schedules could be undertaken.

The procedure set out in the Bill is the best that can be managed. There are a series of avenues through which regulation can be introduced, but it will be introduced by affirmative procedure so that there is an opportunity to kick an item into touch if people disagree with it and feel that it is unduly bureaucratic. We can overcome the difficulties expressed by the hon. Member for West Chelmsford by considering that general provision.

A problem in my constituency would have been handled much better by this Bill than by the existing provisions. About a year ago, there were two massive incidents involving the escape of acid gas at the Sarp plant at Killamarsh. As a result, the population of the area mobilised and organised; they were adamant that they wanted rid of that chemical reclamation plant and the pollution that they had suffered over many years. The two incidents that had led to that crisis and the mobilisation of those people were extreme examples of pollution. Since then, enforcement notices have been issued in relation to other shortcomings of the firm and prosecutions in respect of the two incidents are currently taking place.

Clause 2 would make available to the Secretary of State a regulation procedure that could have applied in those cases. Clause 2(3)(b) states that he can

"make different provision for different cases, including different provision in relation to different persons, circumstances, areas or localities."

That might appear to be a very wide-ranging potential power to put in the hands of the Secretary of State, even if any regulations he made would have to pass the affirmative resolution procedure before they could take effect. However, in the case I described, such a power would have allowed the possibility of consulting the Environment Agency, local government, the industry itself, the small businesses in the area affected by Sarp's operations, and the local action committee which was organised, Residents Against Sarp Pollution. All those views could have been taken on board.

In fact, my right hon. Friend the Minister for the Environment did all that, by visiting the plant and meeting members of the action group and local councillors on 30 July last year. However, he was restricted in terms of possible avenues of action. The Bill would open up those avenues. The Bill might also present the Secretary of State with some problems, because he will face pressure from various local organisations that want to push him into taking action on certain matters, but such democratic pressure is good and healthy.

The Bill will be of great advantage to us in the work to contain and control pollution. It will help us to ensure that people operate according to best practice and that pollutant-creating plants do not affect the population in their locality. Having a healthy local population strikes me as being of great economic advantage: people live longer, earn longer and pay more taxes, and they do not go to hospital as often, so the cost to society of their treatment is less. Therefore, even if we treat people as mere economic units working to create wealth in society, legislation that is sensitive to the need to tackle the problems of pollution cannot be said to impose an excessive burden on society; rather, it is a benefit to

everyone in the long run. The Bill will be of economic and social benefit and it will improve the quality of life of everyone in society.

The Sarp site at Killamarsh is next to a school playing field: they now send out what is known as a sniffer patrol before letting young children play on that field. Tackling and overcoming such problems can do much to enhance the quality of human life. Ultimately, it is all about running an effective, well-organised society that creates wealth and distributes it properly among its people. We should not accept the views of those who want to do nothing and who would leave it to industry to act out of the goodness of its heart. In a system that produces goods but also produces pollution, people benefit, but they also suffer. If we weigh up the costs and benefits of such a society, the overall balance is supposed to be to our advantage, but there are such things as diseconomies, which should be subtracted from the benefits of social activity.

The Bill is important. Governments always have to be watched when they produce regulations, so we must have opportunities to scrutinise and debate such regulations. Some Governments will not produce regulations that are good enough, and they will have to be prodded into doing so. However, I do not see any means other than the Bill of building a system for the future that results in a decent society that protects us from the worst of pollution.

8.39 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions (Ms Glenda Jackson): My hon. Friend the Member for North-East Derbyshire (Mr. Barnes) ended where the hon. Member for West Chelmsford (Mr. Burns) began—with the regulations, which are an essential part of delivering on the Bill. The hon. Member for West Chelmsford expressed his concerns, and my right hon. Friend the Minister for the Environment made it abundantly clear that the House of Lords Select Committee on Delegated Powers and Deregulation believed that as all the regulations were subject to the affirmative procedure, adequate parliamentary control would be retained.

That was underlined by an undertaking given by our noble Friend Lord Whitty that any future amendments to the regulations which changed provisions previously included in the Environmental Protection Act 1990 would be put to Parliament for consideration under the affirmative procedure. We therefore believe that the proper safeguards are in place.

In his contribution, my hon. Friend the Member for North–East Derbyshire made the particularly effective point that regulations are so valuable because they allow flexibility to be brought to bear on a developing scene that is immensely detailed. As he said, that approach avoids static, bureaucratic imposition on industries and business.

Another concern was expressed by the hon. Members for West Chelmsford and for North Wiltshire (Mr. Gray). I was somewhat bemused when the hon. Member for North Wiltshire pulled out of the air the figure of 2,000 small businesses, which he claimed would be caught by the Bill. It is clear in the directive that thresholds have been set in annexe 1, below which the directive will not apply. That means that small firms are unlikely to come within the scope of the directive.

The Federation of Small Businesses has responded constructively to each of the three consultation exercises that we carried out, and it will continue to be consulted. The federation welcomed some of the deregulatory changes that the Government are making in replacing current regimes—for example, the use of standard application forms, which will save manpower costs, and the use of standard permit conditions, which will lead to lower charges. There is scope for less frequent permit reviews for industry, resulting in cost savings, regulators' decision times will be reduced from four months to three months in certain uncontentious cases, and there is the possibility of greater use of standard permit conditions or general binding rules to streamline procedures. I repeat that, as my right hon. Friend said, only a fraction of the Federation of Small Businesses' 130,000 members will be affected.

Mr. Gray: Will the Minister give way?

Ms Jackson: No.

Mr. Gray: The hon. Lady asked a question.

Ms Jackson: I did not ask a question; I made a statement.

Another concern expressed not only by Conservative Members, but by my hon. Friend the Member for Waveney (Mr. Blizzard), related to the use of best available techniques—BAT. My hon. Friend was worried about costs, as the Bill will bring into its remit the offshore gas and oil installations which, as he said, play such a major part in the economy of his area.

The directive states, with regard to best available techniques:

"Available techniques shall mean those developed on a scale which allows implementation in the relevant industrial sector, under economically and technically viable conditions, taking into consideration the costs and advantages".

I trust that I have addressed my hon. Friend's concerns. The site-specific nature of the provisions means that there can be no excessive costs and no bureaucratic regime can be imposed. That point was made by my hon. Friend the Member for North-East Derbyshire.

My hon. Friend the Member for Stoke–on–Trent, North (Ms Walley) offers the House her apologies for the fact that she is not in her place, as she had a prior engagement in her constituency. She brought to the debate all her expertise, information and her commitment to all matters environmental, which does not stem simply from her membership of the Environmental Audit Committee and the all-party environment group. She has pursued environmental matters with passion and integrity, not only while she has been a Member of the House, but before that.

My hon. Friends the Members for West Carmarthen and South Pembrokeshire (Mr. Ainger), for North-East Derbyshire and for Bristol, North-West (Dr. Naysmith) highlighted the impact that failure to protect our environment has had on their constituencies and on their constituents, and my hon. Friend the Member for Waveney told us about the other side of the coin. As my hon. Friend the Member for Stoke-on-Trent, North pointed out, her constituency suffered for many years from the effects of the industrial revolution and

[Ms Jackson]

environmental protection has assisted her local authorities and communities in beginning to improve their environment.

The constituency of my hon. Friend the Member for West Carmarthen and South Pembrokeshire has suffered more than once from the impact of disastrous accidents or failure to protect the environment adequately, and he spoke with a direct appreciation of the benefits that will be brought into play by the Bill. He and my hon. Friend the Member for Stoke-on-Trent, North—indeed, all my hon. Friends—welcomed the holistic approach that is inherent in combining the Environmental Protection Act 1990 and the European directive, which will mean that there will be a less bureaucratic regime. It will also be possible for businesses and industries, which must respond to the requirements of the legislation, to know precisely what is being requested of them.

I was much intrigued by the contribution of the hon. Member for Billericay (Mrs. Gorman), and I regret that she is not in her place. I distinctly remember the first time that she and I exchanged opinions across the Floor of the Chamber, when I was a new Member of the House: she said that, as a scientist, she knew that no damage was being inflicted, there was no hole in the ozone layer and there was no such thing as global warming. I was fascinated to hear tonight that her opinion on those matters has basically not altered.

I was also fascinated by the hon. Lady's ire at what she claimed to be the present Government's introduction of the Bill. She seemed to be entirely ignorant of the fact that the basis of the Bill—the 1990 Act—was introduced by the Conservative Government. The directive, which is being incorporated into that Act through the Bill, was signed by them. However, it is always a pleasure to listen to her because of the delicious frisson caused by disagreeing with virtually everything she has to say.

The contribution of the hon. Member for Carshalton and Wallington (Mr. Brake) was essentially concerned with public information and he said that a comprehensive inventory should be available to the general public. I was somewhat surprised that he cavilled about that because my right hon. Friend and the Government are passionate about developing a comprehensive inventory. As my right hon. Friend said, the Government believe that local people should know what is happening in their own area and information should be available and accessible to them.

My hon. Friend the Member for Bedford (Mr. Hall) was keen to welcome that accessibility. The Bill provides a wide-ranging power requiring information on emissions to be included in a pollution inventory, whether a person is the holder of a permit or not. We welcome the launch by the Environment Agency on 12 May of its inventory in which information on emissions from 2,000 integrated pollution prevention and control processes is presented in an easily accessible form on the internet. We are examining the extension of a similar reporting requirement to the 13,000 processes regulated by local authorities and we hope to announce our conclusions shortly.

As I am sure the hon. Member for Carshalton and Wallington knows, the Environment Agency has plans to require landfill sites and sewage treatment works to make an information report. We shall consider the proposals carefully. We are delivering on our pledges. We expect to announce shortly our conclusions on the extension of the reporting requirement to local authorities. It is wrong to say that the Bill needs amendment before landfill sites and sewage treatment works can be required to report. Under the Bill as it stands, information can be required from any operator, whether or not he holds a permit.

Mr. Brake: Will the Minister seek clarification from the Environment Agency on its view that an amendment to the Bill is required?

Ms Jackson: I am somewhat bemused by that. I am sure that those at the Environment Agency have read the Bill, and it will be clear that paragraph 11 of schedule 1 gives the power to require information from anyone, whether or not he is a permit holder.

The hon. Member for North Wiltshire seemed either not to be aware or not to care very much that the 1990 Act and the directive came into being under the previous Administration.

Mr. Gray: Will the hon. Lady give way?

Ms Jackson: If I may finish this point. The hon. Gentleman is a member of the Select Committee on the Environment, Transport and Regional Affairs, and I can well remember when, during an examination of the British maritime industry, he boasted that as a maritime lawyer he knew nothing about ships. Clearly, it has been central to his professional life to speak at great length on subjects about which he knows absolutely nothing—a habit that he indulged again this evening. He was much concerned about the timing of the directive.

Mr. Gray: Will the hon. Lady give way?

Ms Jackson: If I may just finish. The directive was agreed in the summer of 1995 by the right hon. Member for Suffolk, Coastal (Mr. Gummer).

The hon. Member for North Wiltshire was also concerned about increasing the number of businesses to be regulated from 2,000 to 6,000. The IPPC requires that. Again, that was agreed under the previous Government by the right hon. Member for Suffolk, Coastal, for whom the hon. Gentleman worked.

Mr. Gray: I am grateful to the hon. Lady for giving way at last. She thinks that she knows a lot about these matters. For the record, I am not and have never been a maritime lawyer, and I have never said that I was. I have never claimed to be a maritime lawyer, so I do not know to which exchange she was referring. I am afraid to say that she knows as much about what happened in the Environment, Transport and Regional Affairs Committee as she does about what happened this evening. The point I was making was that the provisions in clause 1(1)(b) and (c) go a great deal further than annexe 1 of the directive. Instead of this cheap actress activity of poking fun across the Chamber, perhaps she should address herself to the Bill. Does she accept that the Bill goes significantly further than the terms of annexe 1 of the directive? Or perhaps she does not know.

Ms Jackson: It is bizarre that the hon. Gentleman intervened earlier and demanded to know why pollution

from light was not within the remit of the Bill. He clearly never listens either to what other people say or to what he says himself, because he cannot remember his own contribution.

A point tellingly made by my hon. Friend the Member for Stroud (Mr. Drew) highlighted how the Bill can protect small businesses from the environmental depredations of larger firms and industries. My hon. Friend the Member for Waveney emphasised the importance of environmental protection in his area. He referred with no small pride to the primacy of the beach at Lowestoft, and stressed that it is by having clean beaches, sea and air that tourism, which is vital in his part of the world as it is in many parts of the United Kingdom, and the well-being of those areas and their local people can be protected and sustained.

We believe that most people both inside and outside the House will welcome the Bill. The issue of environmental protection is increasingly important, not only as it affects the quality of life, but in terms of improving the health of our people and the health of the world. Certainly, we have made clear commitments in regard to Europe; indeed, we have made international commitments. We believe that the Bill will help us to meet those commitments, and I commend it to the House.

Question put and agreed to.

Bill accordingly read a Second time, and committed to a Standing Committee, pursuant to standing Order No. 63 (Committee of Bills).

POLLUTION PREVENTION AND CONTROL BILL [*LORDS*] [*MONEY*]

Queen's recommendation having been signified—

Motion made, and Question put forthwith, pursuant to Standing Order No. 52(1)(a),

That, for the purposes of any Act resulting from the Pollution Prevention and Control Bill *[Lords]*, it is expedient to authorise the payment out of money provided by Parliament of—

(a) any expenditure incurred by any Minister of the Crown in consequence of the Act, and

(b) any increase attributable to the Act in the sums payable under any other Act out of money so provided.—*[Mr. Pope.]*

Question agreed to.

POLLUTION PREVENTION AND CONTROL BILL [*LORDS*] [*WAYS AND MEANS*]

Motion made, and Question put forthwith, pursuant to Standing Order No. 52(1)(a),

That, for the purposes of any Act resulting from the Pollution Prevention and Control Bill *[Lords]*, it is expedient to authorise the imposition of charges under regulations made under the Act.—*[Mr. Pope.]*

Question agreed to.

DELEGATED LEGISLATION

Motion made, and Question put forthwith, pursuant to Standing Order No. 118(6) (Standing Committees on Delegated Legislation),

LOCAL GOVERNMENT FINANCE

That the Local Government Finance (England) Special Grant Report (No. 46): Private Finance Initiative (HC 408), which was laid before this House on 7th May, be approved.—*[Mr. Pope.]*

Question agreed to.

EUROPEAN COMMUNITY DOCUMENTS

Motion made, and Question put forthwith, pursuant to Standing Order No. 119(9) (European Standing Committees),

ASSISTANCE TO NEWLY INDEPENDENT STATES AND MONGOLIA

That this House takes note of European Union Document No. 5263/99, a draft Council Regulation on the provision of assistance to economic reform and recovery in the Newly Independent States and Mongolia; and supports the Government's position that the proposed Regulation is broadly acceptable, that the Government will work with Member States to secure a Regulation which will ensure greater emphasis on social and environmental issues, maintain TACIS as a technical assistance instrument, improve procedures and incorporate a dialogue-driven approach to programming.—*[Mr. Pope.]*

Question agreed to.

PETITION

Medicines Control Agency

8.56 pm

Mr. David Drew (Stroud): I am pleased to be able to present a petition against the powers of the Medicines Control Agency, which was signed by 262 people, most of whom are from my constituency.

The petition supports the views of Consumers for Health Choice, the Health Food Manufacturers Association, the National Association of Health Stores and others. It

Declares that Government proposals would give the Medicines Control Agency . . . virtually unlimited powers to classify safe products as medicines. This would mean that the MCA could remove at a stroke products that are vital to the good health of many consumers and are currently sold under food law. This is an abuse of the democratic process and a denial of freedom of choice.

The Petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urge the Department of Health to reconsider its proposals and to introduce an immediate moratorium preventing the MCA from declaring these safe products to be medicines except on the grounds of illegal claims or safety, and, further, to introduce new legislation appropriate to the special needs of safe, natural health products.

To lie upon the Table.

Guild Trust, Preston

Motion made, and Question proposed, That this House do now adjourn.—*[Mr. Pope.]*

8.58 pm

Mr. Nigel Evans (Ribble Valley): I am grateful for the opportunity to raise the issue of the dismissal of the three non-executive directors of the Guild Community Health Care NHS trust. I am also grateful for the opportunity to raise it at such an early hour. Last time I introduced an Adjournment debate, I did so after 6 am, so nowadays I think long and hard before applying for such debates.

This is a serious issue. Two of the three non-executive directors involved are constituents of mine, as are many of the trust's employees, and one of the directors is a constituent of my right hon. Friend the Member for Fylde (Mr. Jack), who is present. The three non-executive directors were sacked on 17 May for committing the crime of doing their jobs. They are well-respected citizens in the Preston area, and have served the public well with their actions during the case.

This bitter story is one of incompetence, mismanagement, intrigue, the publication of two independent reports, a murder, the suspension of a chief executive, the resignation of a chairman, the intervention of the hon. Member for Preston (Audrey Wise)—to whom I wrote telling her that I would mention her this evening—the dismissal of the three and, finally, the pièce de resistance: yesterday's sacking of the chief executive.

Some might think that the timing—only yesterday—of the sacking of Les Howell, the chief executive, was rather suspicious. The non-executives wanted the chief executive removed many months ago—but therein lies another strange tale.

The chief executive's suspension can be traced back to 8 March 1996, when one of the trust's patients, Daniel Holden, murdered a 42-year-old man named David Spencer. The East Lancashire health authority established an independent inquiry into Daniel Holden's care and treatment, which was chaired by William Greenwood, a solicitor, of Steele, Greenwood, Burnley. Also on the panel were a former consultant forensic psychiatrist, a former director of clinical services, and a former director of personnel of a national health service trust. They are all extremely well-respected figures in the medical profession, and it would behove anyone to take heed of their findings.

The inquiry's damning report was made available in October. It described Daniel Holden's treatment as far from ideal, and said that Daniel was not receiving the care to which he was obliged by statute to receive.

At the time of the murder, Daniel was on the supervision register of the Langdale unit, which is a medium secure unit at Whittingham, in my constituency. The inquiry described enormous deficiencies in Daniel's care and treatment, and said that he did not have a proper care plan, that his case notes were inadequate, and that procedure had been largely ignored. It also said that interdisciplinary and interpersonal workings within the trust were inadequate, and that communication between Daniel's family, his general practitioner and other groups was deficient.

Page 44 of the report states that the shortcomings and omissions in the supervision register included:

"a care plan that aimed to reduce risk and ensure that Daniel Holden's care needs were reviewed regularly, and that contact by a key worker was maintained;

allowing for Daniel Holden's social worker, his GP, a relative or carer—or indeed even Daniel Holden himself—to participate in the initial discussion and decision;

ensuring that the initial decision to put Daniel Holden on the Supervision Register was part of the"

care programme approach;

"discussion;

the carrying out of a risk assessment;

taking evidence from the criminal justice agencies when making the original judgments;

informing Daniel Holden orally of his inclusion on the register".

The report goes on to describe deficiencies in the care programme approach, including omission of

"written evidence of systematic assessment of health and social care needs;

a care plan agreed between relevant professionals, Daniel Holden and his carers recorded in writing;

close working between health and social services . . .

a clear understanding of what to do if Daniel Holden failed to meet requirements or commitments."

The report is damning.

On page 51, the report describes some of the problems with the chief executive. It states:

"However, it is consistent with our other findings about the managerial style of the trust, which was detached, uninvolved and autocratic. The chief executive insisted that Dr. Guly"—

who was the consultant forensic psychiatrist—

"carried an onerous work load of 24 beds plus a clinical directorship, and then put further pressure on her to assume responsibility for the high dependency unit. We find this attitude to have been oppressive. Whatever problems the trust may have had, it should not have acted in a manner that could have led to inadequate performance of her clinical duties and the clinical directorship."

On page 57, the report recommends:

"We believe that chief executives should be highly visible individuals who draw together responsibility for the planning, implementation and the achievement of corporate objectives, to provide the best possible care to patients within existing resources. In our view, these responsibilities have not been adequately discharged—hence the plethora of critical reports about the unit".

The Guild Community Health Care NHS trust was itself at that time facing the threat of losing the contract for medium secure services. Therefore, the chairman, Patricia Diamond, and four non-executives met the chief executives of the four purchasing authorities. At that meeting, the chief executives of the purchasing authorities spoke of their concern about the trust's management style, and the consequent culture of blame and fear within the trust.

Attempts to change the culture by Dr. Kendle—a non-executive—with a statement of intent were reluctantly accepted by the chief executive. The chief executive had a very close working relationship with the chairman of the trust, Patricia Diamond. It was in no way surprising that the statement of intent was ignored, the culture of blame remained and senior staff continued to leave the Guild trust, demoralised.

When the Holden report was sent to the Guild trust, the chief executive responded to it with no reference to the board. The non-executives were informed of the

report's findings only after the chief executive's response. That was the final straw for the three non-executives, who went to the regional headquarters with three executive directors to discuss their concerns and seek advice. Those at regional headquarters said that they shared the concerns of the board members and supported the course of action that the non-executives proposed—to vote on a motion of no confidence in the chief executive.

Before that action could be taken, the chairman of the board, Patricia Diamond, placed the chief executive on extended leave, which, after pressure from the board, was converted into suspension on full pay. That again demonstrates the close working relationship between the chief executive and the chairman.

The Guild trust then set up its own inquiry with the following terms of reference:

"To investigate the criticisms of the Chief Executive of the Trust made in the draft Report into the care and treatment of Daniel Holden dated July 1998.

To investigate the conduct of the Chief Executive following the receipt of the draft Report.

To investigate the Chief Executive's management style and conduct of relationships with Board members"—

and various other individuals, and—

"to make such recommendations to the Trust Board as the Panel considers appropriate."

The panel consisted of Anne Galbraith, the former chairman of an NHS trust in Newcastle upon Tyne, and Neil Campbell, the chief executive of the Dumfries and Galloway health board. They are well respected in the health service and serious attention should be given to their findings. The panel spent five days in Preston taking evidence and was keen to preserve the anonymity of the witnesses. The report makes chilling reading and is more damning than the Holden report. It says that the chief executive's handling of the report was ill advised. Page 7 talks of the chief executive's autocratic and non-consultative approach. Page 8 states:

"the overwhelming number of respondents do not have confidence in the Chief Executive."

The report further states that those who had lost confidence in the chief executive, Mr. Howell, included virtually all the consultants in the trust, the major purchasers from the trust, the community health council, some representatives of the university, the trade union representatives and a sizeable number of trust board members, as well as a number of operational directors.

The report also says that, because of the close working relationship between the chief executive and the chairman, an avenue of checks and balances of corporate governance of the trust was lacking. Page 12 states that the panel was also greatly concerned by the weight of opinion among the consultant body showing a lack of confidence in Mr. Howell's management style.

The report's first recommendation said:

"In the light of Mr. Howell having lost the confidence of many of the key leaders in the trust, including the clinical community and significant external partners, to an extent that his position as chief executive has become untenable, the trust board are recommended to take immediate appropriate action."

Significantly, the report does not ask for the resignation of the non-executives, who raised the issue and pushed it when that was difficult. After it was published, the chairman and another board member, David Nelson, met consultants, union representatives and community health council representatives without consulting other board members about what they were doing.

After this was raised with the regional office by the non-executive directors, Patricia Diamond, the chairman, visited the regional office and was asked to resign, which she did in January 1999. The regional office then recommended that a solicitor, Mr. Martin Edwards, be appointed to help handle the departure of the chief executive. Many options were investigated. But for the cost of litigation, there would have been immediate dismissal. However, the solicitor cautioned the board to be very careful about its decision and suggested that a compensation package for Mr. Howell's departure might be appropriate.

As discussions ensued, the hon. Member for Preston wrote a letter to the acting chief executive of the trust, challenging the Holden report and commenting on the Galbraith-Campbell report. In her letter of 17 January, the hon. Lady wrote:

"As I read the Report, I found myself repeatedly thinking, 'But this is childish". I looked for evidence of wrong-doing and all I saw was gossip and intrigue against the Chief Executive.

I do not believe that the Chairman resigned willingly or that she accepts this Report.

I do not accept this report. If I did I would have to conclude that the only sensible course for the Secretary of State to take would be to dissolve the whole Board and start again. No-one comes out of it with credit, and the Board members themselves appear from it to be totally ineffectual."

As we saw at Question Time today, the hon. Lady has not changed her mind. She fully backs and endorses the chief executive, even though the Holden report and the Galbraith-Campbell report are damning and even though the chief executive was sacked yesterday by the new chairman of the trust, with the unanimous support of the board. I assume that that decision has been endorsed by the Secretary of State for Health and by the region.

The hon. Member for Preston says in her letter that all the board members were ineffectual, but that cannot have been true because at least three non-executive directors pushed the case to where it is today. The hon. Lady's letter is one of the oddest that I have read. It even states at the end that the chairman should be reinstated and the report rejected.

I also understand that the hon. Member for Preston spoke with the Secretary of State for Health, pressing her rather strange ideas on him. He may not have agreed with her every word, but he has agreed with her conclusions: to get rid of all the board members. It is a great shame that when I asked the Secretary of State for Health about the matter, he did not reply to my question himself even though he was the man responsible for the sacking. I wrote to him asking him to be here this evening, so that he could answer some of the points directly, but he is not here.

I should like to know whether the discussion between the hon. Member for Preston and the Secretary of State was minuted; if so, will he publish the minutes of that discussion? What discussions did the Secretary of State have with the region? The region fully backed the actions of the board, but in May it told members of the board that it had lost control four months earlier. To whom had it lost control? Did it lose control directly to the Secretary of State for Health? What has been his involvement in the affair?

[Mr. Nigel Evans]

On 19 May during an Opposition Day debate on the health service, the Secretary of State said:

"Whistleblowers on the staff should have nothing to fear provided of course that they tell the truth."

When my right hon. Friend the shadow Secretary of State for Health said, "So why sack them?" the Secretary of State replied:

"I cannot sack any NHS staff. That comment just displays the ignorance of Opposition Members."—[*Official Report*, 19 May 1999; Vol. 331, c. 1143.]

If that is the case, it is interesting that in a press release issued on 17 May 1999, the NHS Executive stated:

"Mr. Dobson had concluded that relations between members of the Guild board had become irreconcilable and they have been asked to resign in the interests of the people the Trust serves.

The Secretary of State has made it clear to the five non-executives that he will consider applications for NHS trust board membership from any who resign but, in the interests of the effective management of the Trust, if they refuse to resign, they will be dismissed."

That is exactly what has happened.

What I find confusing is the disparity between the Secretary of State's statement during the debate, when he said that he did not have the power to sack NHS staff, and the press release, which states quite clearly that he did sack the non-executive directors.

Is the Secretary of State aware that it was the region's solicitor, Michael Edwards, who was urging caution? Is he aware that, on two separate occasions, board members wished to proceed with the removal of the chief executive? They were asked to halt discussions by the region because the matter was politically sensitive. Really? Politically sensitive to whom? When the board wished to use the sickness procedure—which would have brought the issue to a head—the dismissal letters for the non-executives arrived, and not the dismissal notice for the chief executive. He remained on suspension, but on full pay.

The subsequent sacking of the non-executives has enormous repercussions for other trust boards throughout the country. One board member contacted me, wishing to remain anonymous, and stated her fear that non-executives would have to toe the line or risk losing their positions. That simply cannot continue.

The three non-executives felt it wrong to resign because of the message that that would send to other non-executives. It might also be interpreted as a betrayal of those who had courageously given evidence to the Galbraith-Campbell inquiry. We must remember that Les Howell, the chief executive, was sacked only yesterday, so it is understandable that the non-executives wanted to see the matter through to the end. After all, they had instigated the report.

Both Mrs. Galbraith and Mr. Campbell have said that they are willing to speak to the Secretary of State, the hon. Member for Preston and others about their findings. Why has the Secretary of State still not spoken to the authors of the report? Will the Minister assure the House that he accepts the findings and recommendations of the report, the appointment and terms of reference of which were agreed by the Government's north-west regional office?

Will the Minister confirm the necessity in cases such as this for protecting the evidence of whistleblowers who, without such protection, may feel too fearful of the consequences of speaking out about any problem besetting their health authority or NHS health trust? Does the Minister understand that the report was a consequence, and not the cause, of the chief executive's suspension, which was justified by the existing evidence? Does the Minister understand that the report was commissioned to investigate whether there had been a loss of confidence in the chief executive? It was not a disciplinary investigation.

Why was the acting chairman, Dr. Kendle, instructed not to operate the trust's sickness procedure in respect of the suspended chief executive when he started to submit sick notes to the trust in early April? Why were the non-executives instructed in April to stop everything and to do nothing with regard to the suspended chief executive? Why did the regional office of the Department of Health inform the three non-executive directors in May 1999 that the regional office had lost control of the situation four months previously?

Did not the Minister take the easy way out by removing all the non-executive directors, rather than those responsible for dysfunctional activities in respect of the suspended chief executive? Does the Minister feel that the new board will be compromised in view of the fate of the three predecessors, who acted with conviction, in good faith and on the instructions and advice of the north-west regional office of the Department of Health?

I want the Secretary of State to initiate a full public inquiry into the goings-on at the Guild trust since the publication of the Holden report. The Government were elected on a manifesto which promised openness and transparency. If the Minister stands by that, a public inquiry must be the next step. I understand that the hon. Member for Preston has stated that if the chief executive were dismissed, she would demand that a public inquiry be set up by the Secretary of State. Does she stand by those words? If so, I will be delighted if she joins me in asking the Secretary of State for a public inquiry, and I look forward to her giving evidence to such an inquiry.

This morning, the three non-executive directors who had been sacked issued a statement. Referring to the sacking of the chief executive yesterday, they said:

"This decision by the new Trust Board totally justifies the stand we have taken. It completely exonerates our position because we are the very people who decided to dismiss the suspended chief executive officer because of the widespread loss of confidence in him and we three are the very people who were stopped from doing just that by political interference inside and outside the Trust.

We acted throughout on the instructions of the Regional Office of the Department of Health and on the advice of the solicitor nominated by the North West Regional Office. Our negotiations to terminate the Chief Executive's employment were frustrated by political interference from Mrs. Audrey Wise M. P. and from the North West Regional Office who twice halted and delayed those negotiations, the reason given being "political sensitivity". The nature of that political sensitivity has never been explained and it is surely a dangerous precedent for the internal affairs of a Trust to be disrupted on the basis of undisclosed political sensitivity.

It is most interesting that the announcement of the termination of the Chief Executive's employment should be made on the very morning of the day of the adjournment debate which has arisen as the result of our actions. No doubt people will draw their own conclusions from that.

This is not a party political issue. The Guild Trust's affairs are not just the province of Mrs. Audrey Wise M.P. but also of Nigel Evans M.P. and Michael Jack M.P. who asked us what on earth was

happening in the Trust. When we were invited to resign by the N.W. Regional office we were told that we had behaved impeccably, that we had not put a foot wrong and that they were most anxious to use our considerable expertise in the future in the service of the NHS. To have accepted that invitation would have compromised our integrity and made it impossible for us to speak out as we are doing now about the way that our role as non-executive directors has been disabled and undermined by political interference."

The Secretary of State must prove that he has the interests of the patients and the people of Ribble Valley and Preston, as well as non-executives in the rest of the country, at the forefront of his mind. The setting up of a public inquiry will enable him to do that. I know that the Minister will mention the words "fresh start", as if that could make everything right. Does not he accept what the non-executives say: that Les Howell was sacked only yesterday and that, as they had initiated that course of action, they should have seen it through to the end? What about the message sent to all the other non-executive directors? The Minister cannot hide behind a simple fresh start.

I understand that there are currently two vacancies in neighbouring trusts in Lancashire that members of the trust could have been offered straight away but were not. There are too many unanswered questions. The accusations of political interference are extremely serious and must be answered. The only way in which they can be fairly answered, in an open and transparent way, is through a public inquiry. That would be right for the three non-executives and for their colleagues throughout the country.

I understand that there is a painting in the Tate gallery by a Mr. Frank Dobson, called "Truth". I suspect that it was not painted by the person of that name who is Secretary of State for Health—

The Minister of State, Department of Health (Mr. John Denham): Pathetic.

Mr. Evans: What is pathetic is the way in which three non-executive directors who had done their job and blown the whistle on the chief executive who was mismanaging the trust were sacked by the Secretary of State, even though their view was endorsed by two reports.

I am asking the Minister to ensure that the truth comes out. The only way in which he can assure us of that is by immediately setting up a full independent inquiry to find out exactly what has gone on.

9.24 pm

Mr. Michael Jack (Fylde): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Ribble Valley (Mr. Evans) on the care and precision with which he ordered his account of what I believe is a scandalous situation in the Guild trust. He put on the record in fine detail a tale of growing difficulty that turned to concern, worry and despair for the non-executive directors as they went about their business. The people we are talking about are not party political appointees: they are citizens, chosen and approved by the Secretary of State as suitable people to be the representatives of the public in looking after the activities of the health trust.

I declare an interest in the sense that I am a non-executive director of a public limited company. Part of my role is to ensure that I represent the interests of the shareholders. If those who are in a paid managerial position on the board of the company do something that they should not, or go against the requirements of company law, I must be prepared to be a whistleblower and take a stand against anything that threatens the well-being of the company concerned. I am pleased to say that, so far, I have not seen any examples that would cause me to exercise that responsibility.

I talked to Mrs. Walton and Mrs. Jolly at length on the telephone when they first drew my attention to the concerns that had been well reported in our local newspapers, especially the *Lancashire Evening Post*. Like any Member of Parliament, I am used to talking to people, and I heard much concern from Mrs. Walton and Mrs. Jolly about the public interest. I heard that they had been given those public appointments, and then done what they thought was right and what they had been appointed for. They did not like the way in which the trust was being run, so they found ways, in the context of the report on the Holden case—as my hon. Friend the Member for Ribble Valley has mentioned—to investigate the criticisms that were made.

The two ladies went to the regional health authority and sought its advice on what they should do. The advice was clear: they were correct to ask for a further independent assessment. The two ladies did not rush into public print. When the Holden report was made available, they did not immediately table a motion of no confidence in the chief executive and others. Instead, they meticulously went about their business, as good directors should, and asked for an independent assessment of what had happened in the trust. They did not do that off their own bat, or try to find people who would write the report they wanted. Instead, they sought two people of knowledge and skill and found Galbraith and Campbell, both of whom had had considerable experience in the health service and who wrote the report.

I would have thought that the ladies were correct in the carrying out of their public duties. My hon. Friend the Member for Ribble Valley, in his closing remarks, touched on the central issue arising from the sacking of the three non-executive directors, and that is the question of what those people are supposed to do. What is their purpose? They are appointed to help to run and manage health trusts. However, the three in question were sacked for reasons as yet undisclosed.

We have read the reports in the newspapers, and my hon. Friend mentioned the claim that a fresh start was needed, and that there was disunity and disharmony on the board. All those reasons may be correct, and given the way in which the board was riven after the publication of the Galbraith and Campbell report, I am not surprised. However, sacking the non-executive directors was a funny way in which to treat honest people who were correctly executing their public duties. They were sacked unceremoniously, without any hearing. As my hon. Friend the Member for Ribble Valley said, Mrs. Jolly and Mrs. Walton would have spoken to anyone about what they had discovered.

When I heard about the matter, I tabled a series of what I considered to be sensible questions to the Secretary of State. I asked what discussions he had had with the North West regional health authority on the appointment of investigators to report on the administration of the Guild trust during 1998 and 1999. I was informed that the Secretary of State would let me have a reply "as soon as possible."

[Mr. Michael Jack]

The Secretary of State's Department is on top of what is going on. It is clear that there was a high level of communication between the region and the centre, because the regional health authority suddenly found itself subcontracted as the Secretary of State's agent in the process of dismissal.

The assiduous Caroline Hastie, the health correspondent on the *Lancashire Evening Post*, wrote an article headlined, "Health Chiefs Ordered to Resign". In a sentence above the headline, the article stated that the Secretary of State had told

"bosses to quit by end of day".

Caroline Hastie is a good reporter, not prone to exaggeration. She checks her facts and does the job properly; she saw the hand of the Secretary of State in the matter. However, when we checked behind the scenes, the Secretary of State had shuffled off the stage and the regional health authority was left holding the baby.

My hon. Friend the Member for Ribble Valley mentioned the authority's remarks about the matter being out of control. They show the state of desperation that the Secretary of State had reached. Like Pontius Pilate, he wanted to wash his hands of the affair and let the crowd decide the outcome. I do not know which part of the crowd decided the fate of the three non-executives, but that is the first smell that rises from this affair.

In the second of my questions, I asked the Secretary of State in what ways he had involved the chairman of the North West regional health authority in seeking the resignations of the non-executive directors. The next part of this sorry tale is really nasty. The Secretary of State did not have the openness to write letters to the non-executive directors, whom he must have trusted because he appointed them. By telephone, they told me that they received call after call, with mounting frequency, from the regional health authority, trying to persuade them to tender their resignations.

That is a nasty way to go about it. If those people had done something wrong, was there not a more open and straightforward way to tell them what the problem was? Apparently there was not, but I do not think that Mrs. Jolly and Mrs. Walton have made up the story for effect. I spoke to them, independently and without forewarning, on the same day. They could not have colluded, as there was no time between calls for them to decide to tell me the same story, but they both told me the same facts about the series of telephone calls.

In preparation for this debate, the Minister will have been briefed with a lot of background material. His civil servants will have gathered—from the regional health authority, the Guild trust, and elsewhere—a lot of material from which to synthesise the 15-minute reply that we shall enjoy at the end of the debate. The advice will have been given that some things should be said, and some other things should be left unsaid. That is why my hon. Friend the Member for Ribble Valley has called for a public inquiry, as I suspect that we shall not get to the bottom of the matter.

Mr. Denham *indicated dissent.*

Mr. Jack: The Minister displays a little tetchiness. He wants his chance, but I am sorry to have to tell him that those non-executive directors have looked to my hon. Friend the Member for Ribble Valley and me to place on the record matters about which the Minister may feel deeply uncomfortable, so I have no hesitation in pressing on with my analysis.

The telling question that the Secretary of State failed to answer was simple: would he list the grounds on which he dismissed the board of the Guild trust, Preston? I still do not know why he did that, and he should tell us, in public. I asked whether he would list occasions on which the non-executive directors of the trust sought advice from the North West regional health authority on the way in which the trust was being run, and what advice was given. We should be entitled to know, but all I received on both questions was a holding answer.

I asked whether the Secretary of State would publish correspondence between his Department, the health authority and the chief executive of the trust, during 1998 and 1999, on the chief executive's administration of the trust during that period. I believed that there must have been some comment from the centre on all that was going on. However, I received only a holding answer to that question. I asked questions about meetings and communications involving the Department and the chief executive. I received another holding answer. Finally, when I asked what reports the Department had received on the administration of the trust during the past two years and what conclusions had been drawn, I received another holding answer.

In this age of open government, Members of Parliament should be able to expect answers to sensible, searching questions. The holding answer came on 25 May. By now, I surely should have had a further response. If the Secretary of State can sack the chief executive during the time it has taken me to table questions, I am distressed by the lack of an answer to them. I have received an answer to a couple of other questions, which told me to look in the Library. There we have it.

My hon. Friend the Member for Ribble Valley was right to read the statement published today by those who have been affected by this matter. I shall not detain the House by re-reading the statement, but it was clearly a plea from the heart from good people who feel deeply let down by what has happened. I am not surprised by that. My hon. Friend quoted extensively from the Galbraith-Campbell report, and I shall put on record exactly who the authors are. Mrs. Ann Campbell was formerly the chairman of the Royal Victoria Infirmary and Associated Hospitals NHS trust, Newcastle upon Tyne, a trust often cited and lauded by Ministers. Mr. Neil Campbell was chief executive of Dumfries and Galloway health board. Both know what they are doing when it comes to the health service.

My hon. Friend did not quote page 13 of the report. I do not criticise him for that; many parts of the report deserve detailed comments from the Minister. Page 13 notes:

"A major concern of the panel was the allegation of poor external relations with purchasers, the Region, the University, the Unions, the CHC."

It goes on:

"Purchasers indicated that they are concerned about an atmosphere of secrecy, lack of openness and an unwillingness to accept the role of the Health Authorities in developing and planning".

The university representatives said that they had a

"lack of a feeling of partnership with the Trust, which appeared to regard the University resource as a free good to be milked and used."

The union representatives

"voiced lack of confidence in Mr Howell, evidenced by their wish some time ago to push forward a vote of no confidence in him."

The report goes on:

"The panel is aware of steps which Mr Howell took in relation to North West Lancs Health Authority, where a high level of personal animosity had developed between Mr Howell and Mr Edmundson"—

the authority's chief executive.

I could go on quoting the report, independent evidence that surely emphasises why the three non-executives took it upon themselves to investigate the sordid dealings in the trust. Their reward for being public minded, for doing their job, for blowing the whistle and for taking the lid off a miserable can of worms has been summary dismissal by, we think, the Secretary of State or one of his agents, without explanation, without any letter and without any kind of alternative employment in the health service.

What an advertisement for public service. The whole matter stinks. The only way in which we will get to the bottom of the matter is if the Minister will tonight endorse and agree to the suggestion by my hon. Friend the Member for Ribble Valley that there should be a public inquiry.

9.40 pm

The Minister of State, Department of Health (Mr. John Denham): I congratulate the hon. Member for Ribble Valley (Mr. Evans) on obtaining this debate. Indeed, I am grateful to him for raising the issue of the Guild Community Health Care NHS trust and to the right hon. Member for Fylde (Mr. Jack) for participating in the debate. I am also grateful to them for mentioning the actions that my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State felt it necessary to take on the membership of the trust board. I am grateful because these are important events and it is important to put on record the role of Ministers and officials in this sequence of events. I do not believe that those events fit the construction put on them in the debate.

I apologise to the House as I will, perhaps inevitably, cover some of the same ground as the right hon. Member for Fylde and the hon. Member for Ribble Valley, but it is important to put these matters on the record. First, I confirm that the new chairman of the Guild trust has now written to Mr. Howell, the suspended chief executive, to inform him that his employment will be terminated as from next Friday, 11 June. That decision was taken unanimously by the chairman and her new non-executive team, which concluded that it was in the best interest of the trust.

Our first priority, and that of my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State, throughout this unhappy episode has been to ensure that the best interests of patients are served. Given the events at the trust in recent months, we needed to be confident that the Guild trust was being properly managed and that there was mutual trust between all the board members. That was most definitely not the case. Indeed, the non-executive team had become dysfunctional. There were two camps within the trust board and while that continued it was going to be impossible for people to exercise their corporate role effectively. That is why it was felt necessary to make an entirely fresh start with a new board.

Although, my right hon. Friend valued the contribution that all the non-executive directors had made to the running of the trust, he was determined not to apportion individual blame for their failure to achieve a unified board. He sought their resignations so that they could all serve the NHS in the future.

It would be helpful if I set out the events that have occurred at the Guild trust, which have led us to the position that we are in today. The hon. Gentleman rightly pointed to the independent inquiry into the care of Daniel Holden as being the starting point for the scrutiny of management practice at the Guild trust. East Lancashire health authority commissioned that inquiry following the murder by Mr. Holden of a neighbour in Darwen, Lancashire, in March 1996. At the time of the offence, Mr. Holden was a patient of the Guild trust and was living in the community.

In assessing the role of the trust in caring for Daniel Holden, the inquiry report was highly critical of the management style adopted by the chief executive, Mr. Les Howell. It described him—I may be quoting the same passage of the report that was quoted earlier—as being "detached, uninvolved and autocratic", and asserted that his

"responsibilities had not been adequately discharged".

The report recommended that the trust board should consider how to bring about the changes in management style that were necessary to enable the trust to make a fresh start.

A first draft of the Holden report was made available to trust board members in September last year. Having considered the report's findings, it was at this point that three executive and three non-executive directors decided to make known to the NHS Executive regional office their concerns about the way in which the trust was being managed. They met the north-west regional chairman, Professor Alasdair Breckenridge, and the regional director, Mr. Robert Tinston, on 1 October. They said at that meeting that their concerns pre-dated the inquiry report into Daniel Holden and that they had no confidence that their chairman would ensure that the report's criticisms were properly addressed.

A further meeting was held on 6 October between the trust chair, Mrs. Patricia Diamond, the regional chairman and the regional director, about the position of the trust chief executive. After that meeting and following consultation by the regional office with the then Under-Secretary of State for Health, Mrs. Diamond announced on 8 October that Mr. Howell had been suspended on full pay and without prejudice.

There followed an extraordinary meeting of the trust board on 13 October at which it was unanimously agreed to confirm the suspension of Mr. Howell. At the same meeting, the board unanimously agreed to commission an independent inquiry. Mrs. Ann Galbraith, former chairman of the Royal Victoria Infirmary and Associated Hospitals NHS trust in Newcastle, was chosen to chair it. She was assisted by Mr. Neil Campbell, chief executive of the Dumfries and Galloway health board.

Mr. Jack: In his opening comments, the Minister said that there were two camps, or divisiveness, on the board.

[Mr. Jack]

Did not his last two statements about the board's unanimous decisions on key elements of the investigation of Mr. Howell's performance show that there was unanimity of purpose and action on those two vital points?

Mr. Denham: There was unanimity on that issue but there clearly was not on other issues. I shall explain in a moment why that judgment was reached.

The inquiry's terms of reference were drawn up by the trust board in consultation with the regional office and focused on the criticisms of Mr. Howell that had appeared in the draft report into the care and treatment of Daniel Holden; Mr. Howell's reaction to that report; his management style; and the conduct of working relationships. Throughout all those events, Ministers' offices were kept informed of developments at the Guild trust and the course of action adopted by the trust board.

Mrs. Galbraith's report was submitted to the trust board last December. It was a confidential document and not formally in the public domain, although its contents have been widely reported. Passages have been quoted this evening. Essentially, it confirmed many of the Holden report's criticisms of Mr. Howell. However, it acknowledged that its terms of reference meant that it did not contain details of successful initiatives of the trust under Mr. Howell's leadership. In addition to the criticisms of Mr. Howell, the Galbraith report also criticised the chairman's excessively close working relationship with the chief executive, which it argued had interfered with effective balance and control in the trust.

The trust chair and non-executives met on 29 December and again on 5 January to consider the report's findings and its five recommendations. They agreed that the chief executive's position had become untenable and that there could be no possibility of his reinstatement. However, they were unable to progress the report's other recommendations and it was becoming increasingly obvious that there were deep divisions between three non-executives on the one hand and the chairman and the other two non-executives on the other about the trust's future management.

It emerged that a vote of no confidence in the chairman was likely to be tabled at the board meeting on 19 January by the three non-executives who had originally approached the regional office with their concerns. Given that likelihood, the trust chairman approached the regional chairman for advice and, with reluctance, tendered her resignation on 11 January. That left five non-executives to conduct the trust's business, including the implementation of all aspects of the Galbraith report. Dr. Roger Kendle, a non-executive at the trust, was elected acting chairman after Mrs. Diamond's resignation. However, it became clear that despite the continued suspension of Mr. Howell and the resignation of Mrs. Diamond, the non-executives remained divided over matters relating to the chief executive's position and did not give appropriate attention to other aspects of the Galbraith recommendations.

Significantly, one of the report's five recommendations was to take firm and immediate action to restore confidence in the board's leadership. Sadly, even with a new acting chairman, the board failed fully to consider and address that issue and there continued to be two camps at board level. The three NEDs who broadly accepted all the recommendations of the Galbraith report were advised by Mrs. Galbraith that the trust was no further forward on 19 February, when she met them, than it had been in October.

Ministers received regular reports about those events from the north-west regional office. The Secretary of State visited the NHS Direct site in Chorley on 13 March and took the opportunity to discuss the case with the regional chairman and regional director, who expressed the view that relations on the board had broken down and that a fresh start was required.

In April, the regional chairman recommended to the Secretary of State that he should appoint Mrs. Christine Kirk to chair the trust on a short-term basis until a full-time appointment could be made.

Mr. Evans: I have listened carefully to the Minister's comments. Why were the three non-executive directors told by regional personnel—who were backing them in their action—that the region had lost control four months ago? Will the Minister tell us why he believes that the region had lost control and to whom?

Mr. Denham: On the information available to me, I cannot substantiate the claim made by the hon. Gentleman that the regional office had lost control. I understand that the matter was discussed on 13 March by the regional director, the regional chairman and my right hon. Friend. In that meeting, the view was expressed that relations on the board had broken down and that a fresh start was required. The regional chairman recommended the appointment of Mrs. Christine Kirk to chair the trust. She was chair of the nearby Calderstones NHS trust, having been appointed—as it happens—by the previous Conservative Administration, and was seen as having the necessary skills and experience to guide the Guild trust through a difficult period.

My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State met Mrs. Kirk on 19 April and concluded that she was the right person to undertake the job. She agreed to take up the post temporarily for a six-month period, before returning to the Calderstones trust. Her appointment was formally confirmed on 17 May. Before her formal appointment took effect, my right hon. Friend discussed the future working of the board with Mrs. Kirk. He had formed the view that the trust needed a fresh start with a completely new set of non-executive board members in place. Mrs. Kirk had also reviewed the minutes of previous board discussions and had concluded that the five existing non-executive directors could not work as a team and that to remove either grouping would be to apportion blame. She therefore agreed with my right hon. Friend that a fresh start would be in the best interests of the trust.

My right hon. Friend, however, did not wish to deprive the five non-executives of the opportunity to serve the NHS again. That is why at the end of April, they were informally invited by the regional chairman to submit their resignations from the trust board. My right hon. Friend did not want to terminate their appointments, as that would debar them from holding office again.

Two of the non-executives, Mr. Mallidi and Mr. Nelson, indicated their willingness to resign. However, the other three non-executives—Dr. Kendle,

Mrs. Jolly and Mrs. Walton—advised the regional chairman that they wanted time to consider their position. They wrote to my right hon. Friend on 10 May setting out the reasons why they felt that they should not resign.

My right hon. Friend replied on 12 May, explaining in detail why he felt that a change was necessary. He again emphasised that his first priority was to ensure that the trust was being properly run and was functioning effectively for the benefit of the patients. He made clear his view that, to ensure the successful operation of the Guild trust, there needed to be mutual trust between members of the non-executive team across the complete range of activities.

While stressing that he did not apportion any individual blame, my right hon. Friend said he had formed the view that it would not be in the best interests of the trust, its employees and, most important, those who depended on its services for the non-executive team to stay in post. He believed that a completely fresh start was needed to overcome the complex problems that had beset the Guild trust for far too long. In his letter, my right hon. Friend made it clear that, were he obliged to terminate their period of office, that would debar them from holding office again. Resignation, on the other hand, would allow them to serve the NHS again. Two of the non-executive directors acknowledged that and duly tendered their resignations.

Regrettably, the other three non-executives remained unwilling to resign. In the circumstances, my right hon. Friend felt it necessary to terminate their terms of appointment. That took effect on 18 May. On the same date, a new complement of non-executive directors was appointed to serve on the board. They had been selected by a process that was entirely in accordance with the normal procedures and criteria for NHS appointments, and in line with the guidance issued by the Commissioner for Public Appointments, and the commissioner was briefed personally about the appointments on 19 May.

I am confident that, under new leadership, the Guild trust will be able to put behind it the managerial problems that have occurred. However, recent events should not be allowed to detract from the contribution the previous non-executives made, for which we are grateful. There is no question of people being penalised as a result of passing on their concerns. Let me make it clear: the three non-executives were right to approach the regional office with their concerns about the management of the trust. Where we disagree with them is on whether the trust could continue to operate under a new chairman, but with the same non-executives. We did not believe that this was either realistic or in the best interests of the trust and, given the reluctance of three of the non-executives to resign, my right hon. Friend terminated their appointments.

This has been an extremely unhappy episode and one which, thankfully, is a rare if not unique occurrence.

Mr. Jack: Does the Minister not understand from the exchanges that he has detailed that the non-executive directors who chose not to resign did so on points of principle and honour? They believed that they were right in the stand that they had taken and that, if they resigned, the action would be misconstrued as implying that they had made a wrong judgment.

Mr. Denham: I hope that that is not the case. By placing on the record my view and that of my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State that the non-executive directors were right to approach the regional office in the way that they did, I hope to have ensured that there can be no criticism or question marks in respect of their activities on that occasion. However, given the history of the trust, the decision had to be made as to the right basis for effective leadership on the board which would enable the problems of the past to be put behind the Guild trust and ensure that patients were served well in future. That is the only basis on which my right hon. Friend exercised his judgment in the way I have described.

As I said, these events are rare, if not unique. Not only were there problems of management and leadership at the Guild trust, but they were accompanied by a lack of common purpose and corporate identity among the non-executive board members. It is inevitable that, from time to time, such problems will happen among any group of people who work together, however deep their personal commitment to the NHS. Unfortunately, in the case of the Guild trust, those difficulties coincided with other managerial problems at the trust and we could not allow the situation to continue.

Mr. Evans: Does the Minister not accept that too many unanswered questions still hang over the whole affair? Christine Kirk will be a superb chairman of the trust and I wish her and the new board well in getting on with providing the service that is needed in the area. However, the three non-executives did nothing wrong: they were doing their job when they blew the whistle on the chief executive who was mismanaging the trust, yet their reward has been dismissal. That cannot be right. The only way to answer the questions that remain is to hold a full independent inquiry. Will the Minister give those non-executive directors that inquiry?

Mr. Denham: I have listened to the hon. Gentleman's suggestions and I have set out as clearly as I can the sequence of events, the actions taken by my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State and officials and the basis on which decisions were made. I cannot see how a further inquiry into events at the Guild trust would play any constructive role in enabling the new board and those who work for the trust to meet the needs of patients and develop services in the area. I hope that, when the hon. Gentleman has had a chance to consider my remarks, he will see that there has been a clear basis for the decisions that have been taken, and that those decisions were taken in the best interests of the NHS and the Guild trust, and of the patients and communities they serve.

Question put and agreed to.

Adjourned accordingly at one minute to Ten o'clock.

House of Commons

Wednesday 9 June 1999

The House met at half-past Nine o'clock

PRAYERS

[MADAM SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

Climate Change

Motion made, and Question proposed, That this House do now adjourn.—*[Mr. Dowd.]*

Mr. David Chaytor (Bury, North): I am grateful for the opportunity to open this debate on the most important environmental issue of our time. The threats and challenges posed by climate change do not fit comfortably into the conventional time scales of domestic politics: significant changes of policy do not have immediate effects but without such changes we will continue to walk into the unknown, facing the prospect of unprecedented social and environmental disaster in the first half of the next century.

Climate change is an issue that needs to be dealt with urgently, not only because the clock is already ticking but because, as each day goes by, the scale of the problem is steadily increasing. New research on the availability of the world's oil reserves has highlighted the need for urgent action.

I pay tribute to the work of right hon. and hon. Members who have already made outstanding contributions to the politics of climate change. The right hon. Member for Suffolk, Coastal (Mr. Gummer), as Secretary of State for the Environment, ensured that the implications of climate change were understood by the previous Government.

My right hon. Friend the Deputy Prime Minister ensured that our Government provided international leadership at the Kyoto conference through his tireless work in seeking agreement on the protocol from powerful nations whose natural interests did not automatically coincide.

My right hon. Friend the Minister for the Environment is admired by environmentalists both in the United Kingdom and throughout the European Union for his detailed understanding of the wider implications of climate change and his dogged determination to secure the implementation of the necessary policy changes.

I also pay tribute to the hon. Member for Ceredigion (Mr. Dafis) for his work on the issue and in particular for his recent establishment of the all-party globe group—and I congratulate him on his recent election to the Welsh Assembly.

As tomorrow is polling day for the European elections, I pay tribute to the present Conservative Member of the European Parliament for Surrey who, in his capacity as president of Globe International, has ensured that climate change has been widely debated in the European Parliament and in the legislatures of many other countries. Sadly, he is not a candidate in tomorrow's elections. Had he been so, it is difficult to imagine which of the two Conservative parties he would have represented. Offering a choice of two Conservative parties is taking the belief in freedom of choice to remarkable extremes: it is freedom of choice with a vengeance, and I suspect that the emphasis will be very much on the vengeance after tomorrow's elections.

Climate change was first identified as an issue of international political significance at the Rio Earth summit in 1992, as a result of which 174 countries signed the framework convention on climate change, the substance of which allowed for a voluntary target of restoring the emissions of carbon dioxide and other greenhouse gases to 1990 levels by 2000.

As a result of the evidence produced by the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, representing the overwhelming majority of the world's scientific community, the Kyoto conference of December 1997 established a protocol, including a legal agreement under which the developed countries would reduce their emissions of the six main greenhouse gases—carbon dioxide, methane, hydrofluorocarbons, perfluorocarbons, sulphur hexafluoride and nitrous oxide—to 5.2 per cent. below 1990 levels in the period from 2008 to 2012.

The international scientific community concluded that if no action were taken to reduce greenhouse gas emissions, temperatures would rise by between 1 deg and 3.5 deg by the end of the next century. That statistic will not excite the electorate in an election campaign, but it nevertheless represents the biggest increase in temperature on this planet since the ice age 10,000 years ago.

For those who are sceptical of scientists' ability to make such predictions, I would simply point out that in the past 10 years we have experienced seven of the hottest years since records began in 1860. Climate change is with us now. I repeat that the consensus of the scientific community is that the almost exponential growth in carbon emissions brought about by our burning of fossil fuels throughout the past 200 years, and particularly in the past 100 years, is largely responsible for those temperature increases.

Climate change may not be the most exact term and perhaps we should be speaking of climate instability or climate volatility, because if no action is taken we will experience a dramatic rise in sea levels, by between 15 and 95 cm, as the polar ice caps melt. I calculate that that would result in the loss of virtually the whole of East Anglia and the fenlands, representing about 35 Conservative seats at the last count. I note the presence of the hon. Member for West Chelmsford (Mr. Burns); his seat is on the list of those that would be flooded.

The whole pattern of the world's weather will change, increasing the likelihood of heatwaves, floods, droughts and storms, and intensifying the process of desertification in certain parts of the world, so that many millions of people will no longer be able to grow their own food.

The availability and distribution of water supplies will change unpredictably, with disastrous consequences for agriculture, and biodiversity will be lost as the habitats of rare and vulnerable creatures are destroyed. The economic costs will be enormous, as many insurance companies are now beginning to realise, and the impoverishment or displacement of whole populations will lead to refugee crises of a kind that the world has not yet experienced.

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It therefore seems sensible to take the necessary precautions now, to avoid those unpredictable consequences later. I reiterate my recognition of the preparatory work done by the previous Government, and congratulate the present Government not only on the international leadership shown in helping to negotiate the agreement at Kyoto, but on the speed with which policy has been developed.

It is significant that we are now committed not only to the 12.5 per cent. target—our legally binding share of the European Union's Kyoto target—but to our manifesto commitment to a domestic target of a 20 per cent. cut in CO_2 emissions. To their credit, the Government have moved swiftly in outlining the framework of policies that might achieve that.

The October 1998 consultation paper on climate change was preceded by the White Paper on transport, and followed last month by the White Paper on sustainable development. There have also been important Government statements on renewable energy, the review of energy sources for power generation and the recent consultation paper on fuel poverty.

The recommendations of Lord Marshall's report, which led to the establishment of the climate change levy in the 1999 Budget, as well as other measures in that Budget, will also in time play a significant part in the overall reduction of greenhouse gas emissions. However, the time for talk is now over; it is time for action and implementation.

In response to the admirable range of measures that the Government have already proposed or implemented, I shall raise a series of further points for consideration. First, it is crucial that the Government make clear the nature and status of the 20 per cent. domestic target. It is not legally binding, but it is politically binding. Our election manifesto said:

"We will lead the fight against global warming, through our target of a 20 per cent. reduction in CO_2 emissions by the year 2010".

Last month's White Paper on sustainable development talks about moving towards a domestic goal of a 20 per cent. reduction, and I fear that there is a slight shift of emphasis there. We need clarification, because the target will determine the range of future policies not only in the first decade of the next century but beyond. It should now be possible to set interim targets for a Parliament, with strategic targets for the longer term.

Secondly, transport contributes about 23 per cent. of total emissions. The White Paper on integrated transport produced some excellent ideas around which a new consensus on transport policy can be built, but we are waiting for the means to implement many of those ideas. For example, our attitude to traffic growth is crucial, because we need to clarify the precise extent to which we aim not only to reduce the predicted growth in traffic but to reverse it. I welcome recent ministerial statements confirming the intention to achieve a genuine reduction in absolute terms.

Thirdly, the White Paper refers to a target of generating 10 per cent. of electricity from renewables by 2010. Subsequent statements have implied that that may not be quite such a precise target, so I draw the attention of the House to what has already been achieved elsewhere—for example, in Denmark, where 5 per cent. of electricity is already generated from renewables, and a much tougher target of 20 per cent. has been set for 2010.

A recent report by Greenpeace argues the case for the development of an offshore wind industry, which it says could provide 30,000 jobs. The expansion of renewable forms of energy is no longer a question of technological limitation; it is almost entirely a question of political will.

Fourthly, there is the question of energy efficiency. Four private Members' Bills on the subject have come before the House recently. The Energy Efficiency Bill and the Energy Conservation (Housing) Bill received Government support, but were blocked by Opposition Members. We have to ask ourselves how much longer we can endure a system for dealing with private Members' Bills which allows the infantile antics of a single eccentric Back Bencher to block proposals that are widely considered on both sides of the House to be sensible and positive.

I urge the Government to explore every possible means of incorporating the eminently sensible proposals in those two Bills into other legislation at an early stage. I hope also that they will reconsider the Health Care and Energy Efficiency Bill in the context of preparing the climate change programme later this year.

I welcome the Government's support for the Fuel Poverty and Energy Conservation Bill, and also the recent consultation paper on fuel poverty. There is an urgent need for co-ordination of all the Government's programmes dealing with fuel poverty and energy efficiency along the lines proposed in the Warm Homes and Energy Conservation (Fifteen Year Programme) Bill. It may not be possible at this stage to propose such an ambitious programme, but the fact remains that energy efficiency programmes produce long-term savings after an initial short-term investment. Moreover, where they are specifically designed to alleviate fuel poverty, such programmes emphasise the point that the policies of social justice and the policies of environmental protection are in most cases two sides of the same coin.

Before leaving the subject of energy efficiency, I must point out the continuing anomaly whereby VAT is still levied on most energy-efficient materials. It is particularly important that the Government seek to extend the very welcome VAT exemption that they have already introduced for the home energy efficiency scheme to all energy-saving materials.

Mr. Tam Dalyell (Linlithgow): My hon. Friend has been very candid and well informed in speaking to the House, but how can we duck the question that to achieve those objectives, nuclear capacity will be needed?

Mr. Chaytor: If over the past 50 years a fraction of the public investment that has been made in developing nuclear energy had been applied to developing renewable energy and energy conservation, we would not now need nuclear energy. I think that there is a future role for nuclear energy, but all kinds of questions surround that role, and I do not think that it will be as large as the role that nuclear power now plays. I repeat that at the moment, for reasons of safety and sustainability, I do not believe that there is a strong argument for an expansion of nuclear power.

On the domestic front, the climate change levy is one of the most important economic instruments at the Government's disposal. My right hon. Friend the

Chancellor is to be congratulated on the way in which he and Lord Marshall have successfully developed a consensus behind the concept of the levy. That is not to deny that there are many issues still to be resolved. There will be some lively discussions between the Treasury and the different industrial sectors before agreement is finally reached.

In that context, I draw attention to renewables, to combined heat and power, to the recycling of the revenue from the levy into energy efficiency, and to the need to protect small businesses. If the levy is to be generally accepted as a sensible measure, it must operate with consistency. It would be inconsistent if renewable forms of electricity were subject to the levy to the same extent as other forms, as that would undermine the part of the industry that, by definition, is contributing to the solution rather than causing the problem. A similar case can be made for combined heat and power because of the additional efficiency of CHP plants, although clearly such plants generate significant emissions.

The Government have been at pains to stress the revenue neutrality of the whole operation of recycling revenues. Some £50 million has been set aside for investment in energy efficiency schemes, and there is a strong case for increasing that allocation. It would be self-defeating if the demand for investment in energy efficiency schemes could not be met because of arbitrary limits on the share of climate change levy revenues to be recycled. In the long run, of course, recycling the revenues into energy efficiency could be more productive than simply providing national insurance rebates. However, the key aim underlying the levy must be to deliver whatever form of recycling of revenues will achieve the most effective reduction in CO_2 emissions.

Although the domestic programme is important, when the Government draw up their final strategy, we must accept that whatever they can achieve domestically depends on international developments. However radical our local programme in this country might be, global climate change will not be halted or even slowed down without international agreement. In no other context is the limitation of the power of the nation state in today's inter-dependent world more obvious, or the need for international co-operation through international institutions more important.

Therefore, I wish to comment on the state of negotiations on the Kyoto protocol, which will be enforced only when the signatory nations choose to ratify it. Currently, there is a problem with the position of the United States and of the major blocs representing the developing countries. The Americans will not agree to reduce emissions unless the Chinese and others agree to a reciprocal reduction, while the developing countries do not see why they should have to prejudice the chance of economic growth when the problem of climate change has been created by emissions from the industrial countries. It is crucial that we find a way forward to which the Americans, the Chinese, the Indians and the African nations can agree.

In many analysts' opinion, a policy of contraction and convergence provides the way out of the logjam. Under such a policy, each nation would be allocated a quota of emissions based on population, and set in the context of agreed environmental limits. Over time, industrial nations would be required gradually to reduce emissions, while developing countries would be permitted gradually to increase theirs, until a point was reached at which the emissions quotas of all countries were relatively equal.

That seems to provide the only practical and principled resolution of the conflicting interests of the developed world and the developing world, based on equal rights for all human beings. I urge the Government to present the case for contraction and convergence as a realistic means of facilitating the ratification of the Kyoto protocol. I commend the research conducted by the Global Commons Institute in developing that model.

Another issue related to the Kyoto protocol has to do with the so-called flexibility mechanisms, and in particular with the use of emissions trading, whereby countries can buy pollution credits from other countries. Realistically, that is a necessary device to enable the United States to ratify the protocol and achieve some progress in reducing emissions. However, unless a framework of contraction and convergence is agreed, there remains the problem of the proportion of any country's total emission reductions that can be achieved through emissions trading. Above a specific figure—50 per cent., for example—it would be unlikely that any global emissions reduction would be achieved, as countries would merely buy and sell each other's permissions to emit. Emissions trading can provide an incentive to reduce emissions, but it could also be a device to defer indefinitely the reduction of emissions. To avoid the latter possibility, it is essential that a policy of contraction and convergence is established in advance of agreeing an emissions trading regime.

I have spoken widely about the domestic and international dimensions of the policy changes needed to avoid the worst effects of climate change. Some people will say that it is an unnecessarily complex, bureaucratic and cumbersome set of responses to a single scientific assertion—that accumulated carbon deposits are the direct cause of climate change—and ask what would happen if that theory were to be disproved in a few years' time.

My answer would be simple. Even if the collective wisdom of the intergovernmental panel on climate change were subsequently to be disproved, and even if the political judgment of almost every nation in the world were to be reversed, it would still make absolute sense to start now to reduce our consumption of fossil fuels because, by definition, they will not last for ever. If sustainable development means anything, it surely means that we do not leave the next generation without the means to power factories or heat homes, schools or hospitals.

The finite nature of fossil fuels is most evident with oil. Industrial progress and economic growth in the 20th century have been built on the assumption of infinite supplies of cheap and accessible oil. Empires have been built on the back of cheap oil, and wars fought to maintain its supply. As older oil fields dried up, new ones were discovered and it was assumed that the process would continue indefinitely.

Until recently, it was assumed that current reserves of oil would be plentiful until about 2050. Unfortunately, some of the latest research—and I refer to the work of Colin Campbell and Jean Laherrere, published in the past few months—indicates that that assumption was based on inaccurate figures generated by a dubious methodology that stemmed from the need of oil companies and

[Mr. Chaytor]

oil-producing nations artificially to inflate their reserves for their own political and economic purposes. Global oil production is now forecast to peak before 2010.

There are two consequences of that. First, it is inevitable that the price of crude oil will start to rise, as has happened quite dramatically in the past few months. Secondly, given that North sea production will start to peak even earlier, probably within the next two years, in the early years of the next century the industrialised world will once again be largely dependent on oil from the middle east. Therefore, the geopolitics of the next century will allow only two scenarios: either we start now drastically to reduce our consumption of oil through energy conservation, the exploitation of renewable forms of energy and the development of alternative sources of fuel, or we find ourselves involved in a semi-permanent conflict with Iraq—or another country—throughout the early years of the next century.

To avoid the worst effects of climate change and the possibility of future military conflicts fought in a vain attempt to continue the illusion of infinite supplies of cheap oil, we must initiate now a radical programme of energy conservation, renewables and the development of alternative sources of fuels.

Mr. David Drew (Stroud): I am sorry that I missed the very start of my hon. Friend's speech, but he has concentrated on the role of producers of energy. Will he comment on the role of consumers? In my constituency, consumers have attempted to form a co-operative so that they can buy renewable energies. Is that not a valuable addition to the movement away from our traditional treatment of our climate?

Mr. Chaytor: That is an extremely important point. People's willingness to act depends on the extent to which they understand the scale of the problem, which in turn depends on the extent to which the Government are prepared to introduce a significant programme of political education on these matters. My gut feeling is that many people in Britain have a general understanding that something called global warming is taking place, but that they have not yet understood fully the scale of the problem. There is a major responsibility on the Government and industry not to shy away from the reality of the situation. I welcome my hon. Friend's remarks. I know that many similar bottom-up schemes exist elsewhere in the country, where people understand the need to take action at local level.

Mr. Dalyell: Does my hon. Friend agree that it is high time that we developed a sensible policy towards Iraq, which probably has the largest oil reserves in the world?

Mr. Chaytor: I endorse my hon. Friend's comment.

The time has come for us to see the Government's climate change programme in action. I have a number of questions for my hon. Friend the Minister, in the hope that he will be able to clarify certain matters.

First, will he confirm that the reference to the domestic target for CO_2 reductions included in the White Paper on sustainable development does not represent a shift in the Government's position away from the general election manifesto commitment and from the Prime Minister's statement? Are we still committed to the 20 per cent. target and will the climate change programme include a clear statement showing how we can achieve it? Secondly, will the Government adopt the underlying principles of the contraction and convergence model as the basis for future international negotiations as they seek both to ratify the Kyoto protocol and to achieve international agreement for the years beyond 2010?

Thirdly, will the Minister tell us the latest thinking on the most effective means of recycling revenues from the climate change levy? How will it be used to avoid harming the development of combined heat and power and a viable renewable energy industry? Fourthly, does he accept recent research by Colin Campbell and others that has been adopted in the International Energy Agency's planning assumptions? Does he accept that that creates added impetus for urgent action for a planned and phased withdrawal from our over-dependence on fossil fuels?

It is to the enormous credit of the Government that they—far more than any previous Government—have committed themselves to the objective of sustainable development that will meet the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs. The way in which the Government respond to the threats and challenges posed by climate change, and the many difficult decisions that will need to be taken over coming years and months, will present the major test of how successfully they have achieved their objective.

10.1 am

Mr. Peter Brooke (Cities of London and Westminster): I pay tribute to the hon. Member for Bury, North (Mr. Chaytor) for making this debate possible. I am delighted to be able to speak briefly. I am not a scientist and it is five years since I last spoke in a science debate. I doubt whether non-scientists should speak in science debates more than once in a lustrum. I may be the sole survivor in the House of a seminar on climate change that was mounted by the then Prime Minister, Lady Thatcher, 10 years ago at 12 Downing street. The sole American observer present said at the seminar's conclusion that he doubted whether any other country could have assembled as much political authority and scientific knowledge in a single room.

The hon. Gentleman issued a valuable brief in advance of his debate and I am grateful to him, although I do not intend to speak on that brief. I wish to telegraph a series of largely unrelated points. Winding-up speeches may follow the example of Burke, for whom all the arguments were marshalled in advance like soldiers, although that is generally more suitable for opening speeches. Alternatively, they may follow the example of Fox, who could extemporise at the drop of a hat and genuinely respond to a debate. The Government contain winding-up speakers of both types. On the whole, Foxes make better winding-up speakers and I hope that the Under-Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions,

the hon. Member for Greenwich and Woolwich (Mr. Raynsford), with whom I frequently discuss matters on a wide variety of subjects, will follow the example of Fox.

Mr. Dalyell: For the benefit of the ignorant among us, would the right hon. Gentleman tell us what a lustrum is?

Mr. Brooke: I hesitate to seek to educate the hon. Gentleman, of whom I am very fond, but I said that I had spoken once in five years on science. A lustrum is a period of five years. It is the matching word for decade.

What I have said about wind-up speeches is relevant to environmental change, a subject on which at the end of conferences and debates policy makers from all countries tend to sound as if they had prepared their concluding remarks in advance and then fitted the facts of the conference around them. I said that I would telegraph some points. First, integrated assessments are all very well, but they are only as good as the sum of their parts. Secondly, the buying of surplus from poorer countries—what treaties call flexibility—may not prompt investment by rich countries in energy saving.

Thirdly, the most ambitious targets for energy saving are being set by countries, including the United Kingdom, that have the lowest public sector expenditure on research and development in this area. We had quite high public sector expenditure on R and D during the 1970s, when there was the oil threat, but it has receded. The countries that invest the most in public sector R and D, such as Japan, may have identified a global commercial opportunity that underlies that investment.

Fourthly, new energy sources are grand, but they may bring ancillary problems. For example, as much solar energy could be created in Egypt in a space one two-hundredths of the area covered by the Aswan dam and its hinterland, but the storage problem would have to be solved. There is a moral lesson there: we lost out on the on-land wind issue in the UK seven years ago because the environmental factors were not embraced at the same time as the technology.

Fifthly, 95 per cent. of population growth in the next generation will be in cities. Sixthly, we are confronted by massive problems of biological invasion through trade, air passengers, military mobilisation and mail. Some 54 million air passengers enter the United States, and 180,000 are biologically infested. Of the 80 million Mexican road passengers, 201,000 are biologically infested. Of 40 million Mexican foot passengers, 55,000 are infested. Of 95 million road passengers from Canada, 322,000 are biologically infested. Four per cent. of parcel mail is infested.

Air passenger growth of 15 per cent. means that passengers may be a much larger problem than freight, although the Asian long-haul—I mean longhorn—beetle, which is the greatest current threat in the UK, enters in wooden pallets that must be replaced by plastic. The Mediterranean fruit fly has already been eradicated 17 times in California at a cost of $111 million, but climate change can alter the entire global map of Mediterranean fruit fly incidence.

Seventhly, cloud distribution, with its uncertainties, could have twice the impact of CO_2. We do not yet understand the basic science and we need much more understanding of water vapour in cloud water feedback. Eighthly, few ecological experiments are taking place. The soil experiments in the ecotron under the auspices of the National Environmental Research Council are demonstrating how much we still have to learn. I do not want to enter the debate on soil and genetically modified foods, but soil is a Cinderella and I believe that we have no soil legislation. The ecotron experiments show how effects vary markedly depending on whether the CO_2 is ambient or elevated.

Finally, let me mention three unrelated public policy issues that emphasise the complexity and consequences of these matters. First, the Master of the Rolls is interested in the establishment of an environmental court. It may be imagined that such a court could survive with a handful of environmental experts, but a minimum of a dozen would be required.

Secondly, the Select Committee on Northern Ireland Affairs will meet in private this afternoon to discuss the problem of fuel smuggling into Northern Ireland. The facts are stark. The terms of Kyoto mean that the UK has a reduction target of 12.5 per cent., while the European Union average is 8 per cent. The Republic of Ireland need not reduce at all, but can increase by 13 per cent., making a 25 per cent. difference between the Irish and ourselves. It is no wonder that there is so massive a discrepancy between fuel taxes in the two jurisdictions.

Smuggling is a natural consequence, and law-abiding citizens in Northern Ireland are being turned into law-breakers unless they wish to go out of business. I say gently to the Minister that the Government's response currently verges on the casual as the Treasury and the Northern Ireland Office seem to seek to distance themselves from the predicament, implying that the problem is the other Department's responsibility. So much for joined-up Government.

My third point is a related tax matter. We are all going to be deluged soon with the views of industries on the climate levy. I have not been subjected to any briefings yet, but I suspect that one conclusion that will emerge is that there is a limit to how far industry can carry that particular freight. Although the Government are reluctant to tax us as individuals, if they wish to change behaviour, they will have to consider taxing individuals at last.

Finally, I pay tribute to Imperial college in my constituency, which has assembled 120 academic staff dealing with such issues, with more than 1,000 students, of whom more than half are postgraduate. MSc students can take a shot at addressing the integrated problems of a green society in 2050 after 10 elaborate panel sessions. As an Oxonian, I am necessarily sad that Imperial has temporarily overtaken Oxford as a university; but as its constituency Member I am intensely proud of its contribution, some of which was generously made to me in preparation for this debate.

10.11 am

Dr. Stephen Ladyman (South Thanet): It is always a delight to follow the right hon. Member for Cities of London and Westminster (Mr. Brooke), whose contributions are immensely enjoyable. As a scientist, I wish that all non-scientists were as well informed as him. I shall go to my bed tonight wiser for knowing what a lustrum is.

I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Bury, North (Mr. Chaytor) for making this debate possible. I congratulate him on his remarks with almost all of which I agreed. The one with which I did not agree I shall deal with later. I have four brief points.

[Dr. Stephen Ladyman]

First, climate change is happening. It does not matter why but it is. One might argue that it is due to cyclical effects or greenhouse gases. One might be a proponent of chaos theory and believe that it is caused by a butterfly flapping its wings a hundred years ago, but the fact is that it is inevitable and it will affect us, so we had better start planning for its effects over at least the next two generations. By planning, I mean starting to adapt for the inevitable changes. Clinicians, architects, planners and agriculturalists must get involved in the debate to work out the shape of the world in the next 50 years. Politicians and aid workers must focus on the inevitable changes around the world.

Secondly, the weight of the evidence suggests that greenhouse gas production is linked to the fact of climate change. When they see an animal squashed in the road, most people assume that it was hit by a car without needing to see the car doing the damage. Similarly, the weight of the evidence suggests that greenhouse gases are producing climate change. The wise man, or wise politician, therefore starts to take account of that fact and to plan practical strategies for dealing with it. The American auto industry can object as much as it likes; it can argue that climate change is caused by cyclical effects if it wishes—but the weight of evidence suggests that we should address the issue.

Thirdly, the public like to talk about green issues and watch green documentaries. They may even be prepared to recycle a few bottles and newspapers, but they have shown little sign of being seriously prepared to change their behaviour to address green issues. The previous Government introduced the fuel escalator, which this Government have rightly continued. I have asked a series of parliamentary questions and dug some information out of the Library on car use, car ownership, miles driven and petrol consumption over the past 10 years. There is not the slightest evidence that the public have changed their driving or petrol consumption habits one iota over that time. There is no correlation with price or the highlighting of green issues in the political arena. According to the evidence in the public domain, not one fewer gallon of petrol has been consumed, not a mile fewer driven and not one lower fuel consumption car bought.

Mr. Laurence Robertson (Tewkesbury): The hon. Member for Bury, North (Mr. Chaytor) was with me in America a year ago. Does the hon. Member for South Thanet (Dr. Ladyman) agree that the American approach, of producing cleaner cars, is the way forward because taxes have not persuaded people not to drive?

Dr. Ladyman: I agree. Cleaner cars are vital and must be encouraged. I recommend that the Minister urgently consider the work on fuel cells of the company Zevco, not least because it has promised to produce them in my constituency if its developments are successful. The Government will have to change from taxes such as road fuel duty to more direct and huge taxes on dirty cars with high petrol consumption to force people to buy smaller, more economical cars. We must consider road charges because if people can see a more direct link between the money that goes out of their pockets and the miles that they drive, they may be more willing to take account of such issues.

Fourthly, given that climate change is happening, that we believe that greenhouse gases are involved and that the public are unwilling to change their habits, we must come up with more practical strategies to reduce greenhouse gas production. I have reached my difference with my hon. Friend the Member for Bury, North. I believe that one of the most practical things that we can do is to increase our nuclear energy production. I can see no alternative. No single change that we could make could so dramatically reduce the amount of carbon dioxide going into the air.

Mr. Chaytor: If the debate is shifting towards the role of nuclear power in responding to climate change, how does my hon. Friend propose that the additional waste that would be produced by its expansion be handled, given that we have not got a clue what to do with the mountains of waste generated over the past 40 years?

Dr. Ladyman: I disagree with my hon. Friend's last point. We have got a clue. Scientists have suggested a range of waste strategies but the nature of the debate has not allowed us to acknowledge the fact that safe tools are available if we have the political will to use them. A kilowatt of nuclear energy produces 4g of carbon dioxide, but a kilowatt of gas energy 446g, of oil energy 818g, and of coal energy 955g.

Mrs. Claire Curtis-Thomas (Crosby): As an engineer—mechanical, electrical and civil—I have a vested interest in my hon. Friend's observations. The folly of his argument is to pretend that emissions resulting from nuclear energy justify expansion of the industry. That is misleading, because one of the problems that we are struggling with is the life cycle of the energies available. Life cycle analysis of nuclear energy production shows that its problems far exceed anything from renewable forms of energy. To take only one aspect or benefit of an industry is to mislead the House as to the absolute benefit of that source.

Dr. Ladyman: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for those comments, but the practical benefits and possibilities of using renewable energies are exaggerated. For example, we can calculate the amount of energy that can be extracted from the wind—even whether we can extract 100 per cent. of it—and work out how many wind generators we would need to produce a certain amount of energy. We know what the polluting effects of tidal energy are. If one takes the energy out of the tides, the sediment settles and that can be as polluting to marine life as any oil slick. There are practical limitations to renewable energies.

I put it to my hon. Friends that a 10 per cent. increase—from the current 30 per cent. to 40 per cent.—in the amount of energy that we generate from nuclear power would reduce the amount of carbon dioxide entering our atmosphere in the UK by about 20 million tonnes a year. That would meet our Kyoto guidelines in one fell swoop. We cannot ignore that possibility. However, I do not propose that we act immediately and that we start tomorrow and force it on the public.

Mr. Chaytor: In relation to that theoretical 10 per cent. increase in nuclear energy and its impact on the reduction

of emissions, has my hon. Friend calculated how much that 10 per cent. increase would add to our existing plutonium stockpile?

Dr. Ladyman: I have not made that calculation.

Mr. Dalyell: Is not the question put by my hon. Friend the Member for Bury, North (Mr. Chaytor) another reason why the Government should reply to the House of Lords recommendation that there should be an engineered deep repository? In his winding-up speech, perhaps my hon. Friend the Minister could refer to the House of Lords recommendation and to what the Government's attitude is likely to be—at least in respect of timing.

Dr. Ladyman: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. That is one of the issues on which we need an answer.

However, I do not propose forcing matters on the public. I propose that we open our minds to the possibility that a solution is ready for practical implementation. We should start to have a full debate with the public on that issue. We need unprecedented openness from the industry and from scientists. As someone who began his scientific career working on a reactor site and who also did his postgraduate degree on a reactor site, I have a familiarity with the industry that other right hon. and hon. Members may not have.

When I did my research, I worked seven days a week—like most PhD students. I used to climb happily over the security fence and work alone in the reactor hall and the laboratories—that was in the early 1970s, which were simpler times. My student friends used to do the same. We knew what we were doing and felt confident about it and confident about the technology. People who work in the industry have that degree of familiarity and find it difficult to understand why other people cannot see the benefits that are available from it.

Mrs. Teresa Gorman (Billericay): Does the hon. Gentleman agree that most people are quite happy to sail 20 miles across the channel, or travel under it, to France, where there are about 20 nuclear sites? The people of France are not suffering any devastating down side from that; indeed, they are probably doing rather well for cheap energy.

Dr. Ladyman: I entirely agree with the hon. Lady. My constituents may not realise that they live about 25 miles over the water from those reactors. So far, they have fortunately suffered no side effects.

I want that degree of familiarity with the debate and the issues to register more widely in the public domain. We could then make a sensible and objective decision as to whether we want to increase nuclear power as a percentage of our overall energy strategy. I offer that idea to the Minister as one suggestion for what we might do. Let us start talking again about that issue and put it back on the agenda. Let us consider whether it can be part of the package of measures that we introduce in the future.

10.24 am

Mr. Andrew Stunell (Hazel Grove): The debate has been extremely interesting. I congratulate the hon. Member for Bury, North (Mr. Chaytor) on initiating it on this timely occasion. He put a number of questions that he hoped that the Minister would answer when he winds up. The right hon. Member for Cities of London and Westminster (Mr. Brooke) hoped that the Minister would ad lib a bit in order to respond properly to the debate. Some additional matters have now been brought to the Minister's attention to which I hope that he will be able to respond, because some significant issues have been raised. Perhaps we need to continue the debate in a wider context, as the hon. Member for South Thanet (Dr. Ladyman) requested.

Hon. Members who have spoken so far seem to agree that climate change is real, dangerous and preventable—or at least containable. Liberal Democrats very much welcome the Government's input to the international scene—for example, at the Kyoto and Buenos Aires conferences and in the plethora of reviews and consultation documents that have been published since. There have been so many reviews that, as an energy spokesman, one needs a special wheelbarrow to carry them around in.

Although I welcome those reviews, I point out that the missing element is any consequence from them, so I add a further question to those that have already been put to the Minister: how soon can we expect real policy initiatives and changes to be introduced to implement the ideas in the reviews? I remind the Minister that the target for emissions was to achieve a reduction by 2010 on the baseline of 1990. We are now halfway through that period and, if we need legislation—as we undoubtedly will—together with new taxes, new instructions to the regulators and a public information campaign, all those will take time. Time is leaking away and the opportunities to reach even the legal target—never mind the Labour manifesto target—are becoming harder to achieve.

In some ways the Government have gone the wrong way since they began to take action on climate change. They have slowed down the dash for gas in electricity generation. That means that the rate at which we are making carbon emissions savings has slowed down and will slow down more. The Government have cut value added tax on domestic fuel; that has the consequence that more people—especially those in low-income households—will be able to afford to burn more fuel. Indeed, that is why the cut was made. One can well understand why that was done; I welcome action to relieve fuel poverty. However, the Government have not, at the same time, reduced VAT on insulation and other technologies that could prevent the wasteful consumption of fuel.

The Government have talked about an integrated transport policy, but we understand from the Deputy Prime Minister that there is no time in the legislative timetable to introduce such a policy. At present, there is no money for that. As the hon. Member for Bury, North pointed out, the Government have stood idly by while private Members' Bills that could have helped have been blocked. In the case of the Health Care and Energy Efficiency Bill, the Government offered active spoken support, but they rejected the Bill.

I urge the Government to consider three sectors in which we need to make progress. The first is traffic and transport, which contribute about one quarter of the carbon emissions in this country. It is good to hear that, at speaking engagements throughout the country, the Minister for the Environment and the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions continue

[Mr. Andrew Stunell]

to express a commitment to road traffic reduction—that is, an absolute reduction in road traffic. However, in the House, the words have been more woolly and imprecise. When the Minister responds to the debate, I hope that he will be able to say that what was in the Labour party's manifesto and what Ministers say in the country to sympathetic audiences about an absolute reduction in road traffic remain the Government's commitment. I hope that we shall hear that said clearly in the House.

One of the paradoxes of the debate on climate change is that it focuses to such an extent on transport and traffic, when such factors contribute only one quarter of the UK's carbon emissions. We spend much time worrying about traffic taxes, road pricing and similar measures when we know not only that such measures are unpopular with the public, as the hon. Member for South Thanet indicated, but that they are unlikely to be effective. However, there is little political debate or policy preparation on other major sources of carbon dioxide emissions in the United Kingdom.

Chief among those is electricity generation, which is responsible for a greater proportion of carbon dioxide emissions in this country than traffic—some 30 per cent. I urge the Minister to produce plans and a timetable for a comprehensive energy policy. In the context of the renewables review, I have submitted evidence to the Department of Trade and Industry on the way in which I believe we should proceed. I shall spend a couple of minutes detailing that approach and exploring the "nuclear versus the rest" debate, which has been aired this morning.

We have to develop a strong conservation option: we must stop wasting power and electricity. Such a policy is feasible and the Government should set a target that looks further ahead than 2010. Much of the target setting to 2010 consists of a push here and a squeeze there without any fundamental changes being contemplated. The assumption appears to be that, come 2010, we will reach a plateau beyond which it is not necessary to go; but in fact, after 2010, we shall have to take accelerating and increasingly stiff measures to speed up carbon reduction—which means that we need to develop a strong conservation option.

We have to stabilise and then reduce overall energy use—for example, the use of electric power—while retaining the country's competitiveness and the quality of life of our population. There is nothing difficult about that—we need only apply existing technologies and techniques. Many technical assessments state that half the energy used in the domestic sector is wasted and could be saved by the application of simple, state-of-the-art and currently available measures. Were we to reduce domestic energy consumption by 50 per cent., we would achieve more than could be achieved through the nuclear option.

In addition to conservation, which by 2050 could result in a reduction to only about 70 per cent. of current electricity consumption while maintaining competitiveness and fully implementing any new technology that can be dreamt of, we have to develop a strong renewables option. Using existing, known technologies, we could reach 25 per cent. of electricity generation by use of renewables by 2020, and 50 per cent. by 2050. We should try to achieve that.

We should look at the international scene and learn from other countries that are ahead of us in this respect—countries that currently export renewables technology. Japan has already been mentioned, but I shall refer to Denmark, which supplies 60 per cent. of the world's wind turbine market, thereby enabling both the generation of electricity from renewable sources internationally and the creation of jobs in Denmark. Countries in the developing world, such as China and India, will use increasing amounts of energy, but supplies of coal and oil are not inexhaustible and nor is the atmosphere. Such countries already invest significant sums in renewables: my information is that China already spends more on renewables than the whole of western Europe. A strong indigenous renewables industry would not only be able to exploit such wide open markets, but would help us to achieve our domestic targets.

Dr. Ladyman: I entirely accept the hon. Gentleman's argument in respect of renewables, but are not his figures on potential energy consumption in 2010 based on the assumption that, in 2010, we shall be producing the same sort of things as we produce today, but doing so more efficiently? Is it not true that neither he, nor I, nor anyone else can predict the shape of industry in 2010, what sorts of things we shall be producing, or whether the processes of producing those things will consume large amounts of energy?

Mr. Stunell: Yes, I entirely agree—in this area of policy, almost nothing is predictable from decade to decade. For example, 15 years ago, no one would have predicted that gas would become the preferred fuel for electricity generation. The circumstances might change in future, but even within the existing decision-making framework, technologies are available that could contribute to a solution.

In any case, I suspect that we will all be living in houses, not only in 2010, but in 2050, which is the time scale I am envisaging. There are savings there to be made in the domestic sector, no matter how many computers or unimaginable electronic devices people have. If we act along the lines that I have set out and achieve 50 per cent. of electricity production through renewables, then instead of producing the current annual total of 42 million tonnes of carbon emissions from electricity generation, we could get that figure down to about 10 million tonnes a year. We should be trying to achieve that.

I am not sure whether this is the right debate to discuss the nuclear option, its feasibility and viability. However, I should like to echo the point made by the hon. Member for Bury, North—that for 20 or 30 years the nuclear industry was given every pound it wanted for research and development in the search for the perfect, cheap fuel that would save civilisation. That the industry failed to find that fuel is at least open for discussion. Had similar sums been invested in other technologies, we might be in a better position today.

The remarks made by the right hon. Member for Cities of London and Westminster about wind power and the environment were absolutely true, but it must be emphasised that every energy-generating technology, including the existing electricity generation and distribution network, has an environmental impact of some sort. There are about 100,000 steel electricity pylons in this country; temporarily disregarding the engineering

or the science of doing so, by putting a 1 MW wind turbine on each pylon, we could generate three times this country's current energy consumption. Even though we might have stopped noticing the environmental impact of current technologies, it does not mean that impact does not exist.

I hope the Minister will tell us today that the Government are going to be bold: that at the hard end they will examine taxation and legislation, that at the soft end they will consider regulation and information, and that they will work hard to change popular culture. I am far more optimistic about our ability to change popular culture than the hon. Member for South Thanet. Everybody now wears a seat belt, not because that is the law, but because popular culture has accepted the wearing of seat belts; and everyone is now so keen to recycle paper that the market is permanently swamped and we cannot get rid of the stuff. Once people accept that doing something is good, it can catch on remarkably quickly.

We need regulation and we must ensure that new energy supply companies have strong rules. For example, it would be good if ESCOs administered home MOTs for energy wastage, or if they were required to provide two-way meters so that micro-renewables could be applied at point of use. Many things could be done and in my evidence to the renewables review I made some suggestions to the Government.

I hope that the Government will give an assurance that they will support private Members' legislation that is neutral and has a low fiscal impact. I also hope that the Government will introduce a real carbon tax and reinvest that money in renewables and conservation. They should also get the regulators to impress on energy companies the need for conservation and renewables and should work with others to inform the public and to change popular culture. The debate has raised several questions and I hope that the Minister will be able to answer some of them at least.

10.40 am

Mr. Simon Burns (West Chelmsford): I thank the hon. Member for Bury, North (Mr. Chaytor) for giving the House the opportunity to discuss this important issue and for instigating an intelligent and thought-provoking debate. In this country, we are fortunate that the environment, and the specific issue of climate change, are high up the political agenda, unlike in certain other countries. That is due originally to a speech by Baroness Thatcher in the late 1980s, to the work of my right hon. Friends the Members for Suffolk, Coastal (Mr. Gummer) and for Huntingdon (Mr. Major) at the Rio summit, and—in fairness—to the efforts of this Government, through the work of the Deputy Prime Minister and the Minister for the Environment in Kyoto and in Buenos Aires.

Some criticisms have been made that we hear much rhetoric and less action, and they were echoed modestly today by some hon. Members. While reviews and consultation are important, it is time—after two years in government—for action. No doubt the Minister will be able to elaborate on the Government's plans for the next two years.

The policies on climate change of the previous Government and of this Government have focused on prevention. They have set targets for reducing the emissions of greenhouse gases, and that is welcome. Indeed, the Government in their manifesto went beyond the requirements to which we signed up in Kyoto, and it will be interesting to hear the Minister's response to the questions from the hon. Members for Bury, North and for South Thanet (Dr. Ladyman) about a possible shift in the 20 per cent. target.

I wish to raise the issue of adaptation, which is as important as prevention but does not figure as much in the public mind. We could take three approaches to the catastrophic problem facing our planet. We could accept the changes and take no action, but no one in his right mind is prepared to be complacent and take that approach. I have already mentioned the prevention approach, which the previous Government and this Government have sought to undertake through our international commitments and by encouraging other nations to play their part.

Reference has also been made to the United States. I welcome the fact that the US Government had a more positive approach at Buenos Aires, but I have serious misgivings because the US Government are not the US Congress. Any hon. Members who have had dealings with American Congressmen will probably have felt that they were dealing with Neanderthals when it came to the question of climate change and its environmental impact. That is more to do with internal domestic politics in the districts of those Congressmen, who are not prepared to show the courage that Governments in this country have shown in the past decade, and more must be done in that area.

The third approach is the adaptation of human and natural systems to protect society and individuals from the impact of what is happening. The 1996 climate change impacts review group report contains several key responses, and more should be done to ensure that we can adapt to living in a greenhouse world. We must develop more ability to cope with extreme weather-related events, such as storms, floods, landslides and the erosion of our coasts. We must ensure that we have a cohesive policy for managing agriculture to respond to the changing conditions.

It is also crucial to safeguard the public against disease, heatstroke, food poisoning and tanning, with all the problems the latter causes for skin, such as cancer. We must ensure maximum conservation of water resources, especially in the south-east of this country, and we must encourage more exciting and innovative approaches to construction and urban design to minimise the effects of increased temperatures, higher wind speeds and flooding, and to improve energy conservation and the warmth of homes.

Several hon. Members rightly drew attention to the four relevant private Members' Bills before the House. I fully support the ethos behind those Bills and I hope that they will reach the statute book, if necessary through the use of Government time. Energy efficiency, the reduction—preferably the abolition—of fuel poverty, combined heat and light and, as many hon. Members have mentioned, renewable sources of energy are all important. I thank the hon. Member for Bury, North again for what has been, for the House of Commons, a very intelligent debate.

10.48 am

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions (Mr. Nick Raynsford): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member

[Mr. Nick Raynsford]

for Bury, North (Mr. Chaytor) on securing this debate on a subject that, as he emphasised, is probably the most important environmental issue facing the world today, and on the knowledgeable and skilful way in which he presented the issues. He demonstrated clearly why he is widely recognised as having great expertise on this subject.

I shall begin by making a few general points about the action the Government are taking to tackle the threat of climate change and then I shall respond briefly to some of the points that have been raised this morning. I acknowledge the approach of the hon. Member for West Chelmsford (Mr. Burns) in emphasising the quality of this debate. Hon. Members on both sides of the House have shown a serious and intelligent approach to the issue. My only difficulty is that the complexity and scale of the issues that have been raised will make it impossible for me to do justice to them in just over 10 minutes. I shall do my best, however.

The right hon. Member for Cities of London and Westminster (Mr. Brooke) challenged me to adopt a Fox approach rather than a Burke approach. I am delighted to hear him supporting the radical rather than the Conservative, and I will do my best. As he will recognise, because he was a Minister for many years dealing with issues of huge importance, certain subjects must be put on the record clearly without extemporising to the degree that some hon. Members would like.

I loved the right hon. Gentleman's references to the problems created by the growth of air traffic and the pests that can now travel from one country to another. He made a delightful slip of the tongue when he referred not to the longhorn beetle but to the long-haul beetle—which is a further illustration of the problem. I noted also the right hon. Gentleman's tribute to Imperial college and his slight ambivalence at the fact that its rising academic success has meant that it has surpassed the record of his former university. I am delighted to inform the House that my former university, Cambridge, remains ahead of both Imperial college and Oxford university and is renowned in the field of science.

Scientific evidence on the rate of climate change is becoming clearer all the time. As my hon. Friend the Member for Bury, North emphasised, records show that, globally, seven of the past 10 years have been the hottest since records began in 1860. Global surface temperatures are increasing at a rate that will exceed anything that has been seen since the end of the last ice age 10,000 years ago. The world's most authoritative scientists on the intergovernmental panel on climate change have concluded that the balance of evidence suggests a discernible human influence on the global climate. There is no doubt that it is getting warmer and there is also no doubt that man-made emissions are contributing to that rise in temperature. This means that, unless we act now, we can expect more flooding, more severe winter gales, more storms and more droughts. The human, social and economic costs could be extremely severe.

The Government have pledged to do what we can to ensure that the impact of climate change is reduced as much as possible. We are playing a leading role in international negotiations, and I thank hon. Members on both sides of the House for acknowledging the Government's attempts to work with all other countries in this field to achieve satisfactory international agreements.

The Rio earth summit in 1992 demonstrated an international consensus on the need to act, when 154 countries signed the United Nations framework convention on climate change. In Kyoto in 1997, industrialised countries went further, agreeing legally binding targets for cutting emissions of greenhouse gases. That was an important and historic step. Of course, we must now move from agreement to implementation. International negotiations are focused on working up the rules and procedures needed for the effective implementation of the Kyoto protocol.

In Buenos Aires last November, the parties agreed a detailed work programme—the Buenos Aires action plan—that sets out all the issues that still need to be resolved. They include: the design of the "Kyoto mechanisms"; the definition of guidelines for reporting emissions and monitoring compliance; and procedures for addressing cases of non-compliance. The United Kingdom is keen to ensure that we make real progress on all those issues and that the negotiations do not get bogged down in a sterile debate between developed and developing countries.

My hon. Friend raised the difficult and important issue of contraction and convergence. It is an interesting idea, but at Buenos Aires neither the developed nor developing countries were ready to sign up to the kinds of targets envisaged by this approach. It will be difficult to match up, given the widely differing conditions in different countries—I think particularly of differing weather patterns and temperatures, which can have a profound effect on the energy mix required in any country—and very real difficulties will need to be factored into any converged emissions target. The idea of contraction and convergence is likely to make an important contribution to the climate change debate in future, however, when negotiations take place on how further greenhouse gas reductions may be achieved equitably. I hope that that is a helpful response to my hon. Friend's comments.

Although the Kyoto protocol sets targets only for developed countries, we should not underestimate the steps that developing countries are also taking to reduce their emissions. Many developing countries are taking domestic action to improve transport technologies and energy efficiency, all of which can be only beneficial to climate change. The United Kingdom is working to engage key developing countries, such as India and China, in a constructive dialogue about how they can build on existing domestic action.

However, developing countries rightly want to see that the developed world is serious about delivering on its promises. There are many options open to developed countries, including the use of the Kyoto mechanisms, to enable them to meet their targets cost effectively. However, we firmly believe that domestic action must form the main means of meeting our Kyoto commitments. I think it will help the House if I outline what we are trying to do in this field.

We have led the way by going beyond our legally binding Kyoto target of a 12.5 per cent. reduction and setting our much more challenging 20 per cent. domestic goal for reductions in CO_2 emissions rather than the basket of greenhouse gases. In response to my hon. Friend

and other hon. Members who raised this question, I can confirm that that remains the Government's goal—although all hon. Members will recognise that it is an extremely challenging target. Unless we are successful in implementing the range of policies that I shall describe, that goal will be even harder to achieve.

The hon. Member for Hazel Grove (Mr. Stunell) asked several questions about the integrated transport policy. He recognised that that policy is critical to achieving significant reductions in CO_2 emissions. Changes to transport taxation announced by the Chancellor that are designed to cut emissions will make a contribution. I refer not only to the continuation of the fuel duty escalator but to a new vehicle excise duty system that benefits those driving smaller, more efficient cars, and changes to the company car tax system designed to remove incentives for people to drive more and to encourage people to buy more fuel-efficient cars.

Speaking as Minister for London, I remind the hon. Gentleman that the Government have introduced powers in the Greater London Authority Bill to enable the mayor of London to introduce a congestion charging and non-residential parking scheme designed not only to discourage the unnecessary use of motor vehicles—particularly in congested areas—but to allow the hypothecated revenue from those charges to be used for specific investment in public transport, to make it easier for people to travel other than by private car. We are taking important practical steps to give effect to the integrated transport White Paper strategy.

The utility reform Bill will assist the Government by including powers to set energy efficiency standards of performance and requiring the gas and electricity companies to encourage and assist customers to use less energy. Meanwhile, we hope that the energy regulator, using the powers under the existing legislation, will continue the successful electricity EESOP scheme and extend it to help gas consumers. The radically improved fuel poverty programme that we announced recently—to which several hon. Members referred—will help to ensure that old people, the disabled, children and people with health difficulties have properly insulated and heated homes. The measure aims primarily to tackle fuel poverty, but it will contribute to reducing carbon emissions in certain cases.

I stress that the programme's main focus is to help those people who suffer seriously from fuel poverty to enjoy higher standards of comfort. I make no apologies for measures that are designed to help the poor to keep warm. It is not acceptable that many people die during the winter because they cannot keep warm. That is a major social responsibility that we must tackle.

Mr. Dalyell: That is peanuts compared to the nuclear issue. Will the Minister comment about the vitally important deeply engineered repository?

Mr. Raynsford: I was about to come to that. My hon. Friend will recognise that there are a wide range of issues, and I do not accept that the points that I have raised are "peanuts". If we succeed in reducing carbon dioxide emission from motor vehicles, in the home and in buildings through more energy efficient measures and better building regulations—we are reviewing part L of the building regulations—that will be a significant achievement.

The climate change levy will encourage businesses to use energy more efficiently. We recognise the particular concerns of energy-intensive industries and offer the prospect of a significantly lower rate of levy to those sectors that enter into agreements to improve energy efficiency and reduce emissions. We are consulting specifically on that issue—to which my hon. Friend the Member for Bury, North referred—and we are working to ensure a constructive approach to combined heat and power and renewables as part of the package. That approach is under consultation so I cannot give a more definitive answer today.

My hon. Friend the Member for South Thanet (Dr. Ladyman) referred to the importance of changing people's attitudes. That is a key element in the Government's £7 million "Are you doing your bit?" publicity campaign. My hon. Friend the Member for Linlithgow (Mr. Dalyell) asked about the Government's response to the House of Lords recommendations on the storage of nuclear waste. The Government will respond to that in due course, and I shall ask my right hon. Friend the Minister for the Environment to write to my hon. Friend about it—

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Sir Alan Haselhurst): Order. We shall now move on to the next debate.

Constitutional Reform (England)

11 am

Mr. James Gray (North Wiltshire): I am delighted to have the opportunity to introduce this debate, which is crucial for the United Kingdom. This morning, however, I speak more particularly as the Member of Parliament for North Wiltshire. It is worth my admitting, before anyone else points it out, that I am a Scot. I was born, bred and educated in Scotland, as I have already pointed out in one or two debates on devolution. Now, I speak not as a Scot but as someone who has spent more than half his life in England. I speak as an honorary Englishman, and as a Member who represents an English constituency.

This debate is vital for my constituents because, in the past two years of constitutional debate and the headlong rush towards devolution for Scotland and Wales, not a word has been said about the English question. England is a slumbering giant who is only now beginning to wake up and think about the English question.

I am delighted to see in his place this morning the hon. Member for Linlithgow (Mr. Dalyell) who, 20 or 30 years ago, first raised all these issues in the famous West Lothian question. Unfortunately, he will have to leave the debate later, so we shall not hear his views on the English question, which would be to the point. The West Lothian question remains on the table, unanswered. The Labour Government, in their fixation on Scotland and Wales, have not even tried to address that question and its consequences for England.

Even the recent report by the Select Committee on Procedure, which is grandly entitled "The Procedural Consequences of Devolution", does not mention the English question in its many hundreds of pages. It makes no attempt whatsoever to address the consequences of devolution for my constituents in England. That is a shame, because there is a variety of procedural and structural solutions to the West Lothian question which should have been addressed, and which should be addressed now that Scotland and Wales are, so to speak, out of the way.

Those solutions include a full English Parliament. I pay tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for Billericay (Mrs. Gorman), who recently produced a book called "The English Parliament". If she is lucky enough to catch your eye later, Mr. Deputy Speaker, she will undoubtedly want to expand on that option. Another procedural option is curiously called the in-and-out method. I shall not attempt to deal with all the various options this morning because this is not an academic lecture. We are not discussing the various constitutional possibilities available to us, although I look forward to hearing my right hon. and hon. Friends' solutions to the West Lothian question later in the debate.

The important point is the principle that, since devolution, Members of the Scottish Parliament in Holyrood speak and vote exclusively on Scottish business; to a lesser degree, Members of the Welsh Assembly in Cardiff speak and vote on Welsh matters, and Northern Ireland Members in Stormont will speak and vote on Northern Irish matters. Why, then, should Scottish and Welsh Members come here and speak and vote on English matters? That position is totally illogical and unsustainable. Why should the fate of my constituents in North Wiltshire depend on the peculiar parliamentary arithmetic that includes those people who have chosen to set up their own Parliament in Edinburgh and Assembly in Wales? There is no logic in that, and it is important that this Parliament now addresses that question.

If the solution is that English Members of Parliament come to Westminster to speak and vote exclusively on English matters, as they did before 1707, so be it. That is my personal preference. That would be the price that Scotland and Wales must pay for devolution. If we have English MPs in this place speaking and voting on English matters, there will be important constitutional consequences that we must start to address. Those consequences are the prime reason that the Labour party will not even consider that solution.

First, it is extremely likely that the party in power—the majority party—in England would be different from the majority party in the United Kingdom.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions (Mr. Nick Raynsford) *indicated dissent.*

Mr. Gray: The Minister shakes his head. He would be right to say that in this Parliament, of course, there would be a Labour majority in England as there is in Scotland. I shall return to his challenge in a moment.

Labour's fear is that there would be a Conservative majority in England, as there has been for about 90 per cent. of this century, even when there has been an overall Labour majority provided by the Scottish Labour MPs. While we have one Parliament, one Government and one constitution, we in North Wiltshire do not mind being dominated by Labour MPs and a Labour Government even if there is a Conservative majority in England. However, the position is quite different if Scotland and Wales have their own Parliament and Assembly respectively. Why should my constituents in North Wiltshire then be dominated by a Labour Government if there is a Conservative majority in England?

That brings me back to the Minister's indication of dissent a moment ago. If he believes, in his arrogant new Labour manner, that new Labour will have a majority in England for all time, I put to him not the West Lothian question but the Chippenham challenge: he must allow an English Government to be set up, based on the majority of Members of Parliament in England, as he appears to be confident that Labour will dominate that Government as well as the UK Government. Let the Minister put his money where his mouth is and agree to my proposal.

It is clear that if we had English Members of Parliament speaking and voting on English matters in Westminster, the UK Government would not fall every time they lost a Division in the English Parliament. They would want to maintain their power over the UK. The majority in England would effectively form an English Government. Perhaps an English Parliament is too grand an expression, but we could have an English Government. Certain Departments of State, particularly those that have no interest in Scotland and Wales, would then be answerable to English Ministers sitting in this place as part of an English Government, who would match those in Scotland and Wales.

If there were any difference in parity between the English and UK Governments, the position would be no more complex than it would if we had a Conservative

Government in the UK—as many Conservative Members hope and expect that we shall in two years—and a Labour Government in Holyrood or a Labour-dominated Assembly in Cardiff. The stresses and strains between Holyrood and Westminster, which have so often been pointed out by the hon. Member for Linlithgow, are precisely the same as those that would exist if we had a Labour Government nationally and an English Government.

The second problem of which the Labour Government are well aware, and the second reason that they will not even begin to accept my proposed solution, relates to the Barnett formula. If we had an English Government at Westminster, how could we justify the fact that the Government spend £4,792 per head in Scotland, compared to £3,897 in England? Why is less spent on the English than on the Scots? Why does Scotland annually receive a subsidy of £7 billion, or £1,000 per head of population?

That is fine while we are one nation with one Government and one Parliament. The richer parts of the nation must subsidise the poorer parts. I am only too pleased that that is the case. That would remain the case for the north-east and north-west of England and, perhaps, Devon and Cornwall. My relatively prosperous constituents in North Wiltshire should pay their taxes towards subsidising the less prosperous parts of the nation, but not when the less prosperous parts are making their own decisions. Why should my constituents subsidise decisions made in Holyrood over which I have no control and in which I have no say?

The Institute for Fiscal Studies considered that question carefully and said that if we ended the subsidy to Scotland, the base rate of income tax in Scotland would be 48p in the pound. If so—I should regret it from the point of view of my mother and my relations and friends who live in Scotland—so be it. The Scots will be realising for the first time the true cost of the Parliament with which I for one so often disagreed.

If there is such a solution to the West Lothian question, a number of interesting consequences arise will from it. The first I call the Airdrie and Shotts question. If the Government accept my solution, why on earth should Scottish Members of Parliament—in this case the Minister for Transport, the right hon. Member for Airdrie and Shotts (Mrs. Liddell)—have a say in London over English transport matters? The right hon. Lady cannot do so similarly in Holyrood. She has no influence over Scottish transport—she is not allowed to have any such influence. She is specifically excluded from talking about Scottish transport matters, but may pontificate on what English truckers and drivers must do. What possible justification can there be for that? I cannot go to Holyrood and pontificate on Scottish transport, so why should she do so on matters concerning my truckers in Wiltshire? Representing a Scottish constituency, she has no say whatever over transport matters in Scotland.

Mr. David Maclean (Penrith and The Border): The situation is even worse than that. The matter is not just one of the Minister for Transport pontificating. She is presiding over a roads budget in England which the Government have drastically slashed. The M6 in the north of my constituency, just south of the Scottish border, is a good case in point—an important piece of road has not been built. At the same time, the right hon. Lady, as a Scottish Member of Parliament, is benefiting from a Scottish roads budget that is 24 per cent. greater. That is a fundamental injustice.

Mr. Gray: My right hon. Friend makes a very sound point. The Prime Minister will shortly have an opportunity to correct that wrong. If he is to avoid the wrath of the English, he must consider in the reshuffle that is coming up whether it will be acceptable for Scottish Members of Parliament to remain as Ministers in England.

There is a slightly broader question, too. Why should Scottish Members of Parliament have such a disproportionate effect in the Cabinet? Around the Cabinet table, there are at the moment 22 Cabinet Ministers. Five of them represent Scottish seats and a further two happen to be Scots representing constituencies here in England. The Prime Minister, the Chancellor of the Exchequer, the Foreign Secretary, the Secretary of State for Defence, the Lord Chancellor and the Secretary of State for Social Security are all Scots who sit here in England and talk about English matters. The Scots amount to 9 per cent. of the United Kingdom's population, but are represented by 33 per cent. of the Cabinet. Why should that be?

While we were one nation, with one Parliament and one Government, that was of course acceptable. As a Scot who is proud to represent an English seat, I am only too delighted that my nation has had a disproportionate effect on running the world over the past 200 or 300 years. However, now that the Scots have gone their own way in Holyrood, how can we possibly justify the fact that 33 per cent. of the Cabinet that runs the United Kingdom are Scots, and the English are ignored?

Mr. John Bercow (Buckingham): In addition to the inequities that my hon. Friend has described, does he agree that Members of this House representing Scottish constituencies, who also serve in the Scottish Parliament and are therefore twin-trackers, should not be allowed to vote in this House so as to advantage their Scottish constituents and the cause of the Scottish Parliament, and in the process disadvantage the vast majority of constituencies represented in this House? Is that not palpably wrong?

Mr. Gray: My hon. Friend makes an extremely good point on the arithmetic of the number of Members of Parliament here and their prospective jobs. If he will forgive me, I shall reply to his point in a moment.

Before I lose sight of the way in which Scots run the United Kingdom, I for once want to quote Jeremy Paxman—not usually a friend of anything that the Conservative party says, although on this occasion what he said was quite sensible. He said:

> "An Englishman can be defined as someone who lives on an island in the North Sea governed by Scots."

That may work for one Parliament, but the moment that there is a Scottish Parliament and a Welsh Assembly, as is now so, it is no longer acceptable. England, this morning, is beginning to turn.

My hon. Friend the Member for Buckingham (Mr. Bercow) mentioned the consequences for Back Benchers in this place. There are indeed consequences for Back Benchers' roles. At the moment, every Scottish Member of Parliament represents about 54,000 people,

[Mr. Gray]

and every English Member of Parliament represents about 69,000 people. I am particularly fortunate because I represent 77,000 people in North Wiltshire. I therefore represent about one and a half times as many people as Scots Members of Parliament do.

The Government realised that fact during the passage of the Scotland Act 1998, and wrote into the Act that as soon as time permits—I believe well into the next century, following the next boundary commission report—Scots Members of Parliament will move to parity with English Members. They will have to represent 69,000 people, and perhaps 77,000 people in one or two places, as we do. Why on earth should that be? What possible logic is there in a Scottish Member of Parliament who, due to the proportional representation system that has prevailed in Scotland, is helped out by two or three Members of the Scottish Parliament, doing the same job as I do single-handedly for my constituents in England?

I deal with education, health, the environment, transport and all such issues. I deal with every parliamentary issue on behalf of my 77,000 constituents, whereas there are four Members of Parliament for each Scottish constituency, and one deals only with foreign policy, defence and social security. What on earth will these guys in England do all day? Their constituency business will be divided among four people, and much of it will be dealt with in Edinburgh. They may have the Child Support Agency and one or two other constituency bits and pieces to address down here, but they will have nothing to do in most policy areas. How can they justify their time here?

What is more, how can they justify how much they are paid? How can I be paid £47,000 a year to represent 77,000 people on a range of policies, whereas, apparently, they will be paid £47,000 a year to do half or a quarter of my job? I say that slightly tongue in cheek because, of course, they will have the same outgoings as I do, and I would not want some of my friends who are Scottish Members of Parliament at the moment to cease buying my drinks in the bar. Nevertheless, the point behind my remarks is important. Scottish Members of Parliament may sit here, but they do not have a job to do.

Never mind parity, as the Scotland Act allows; what about reducing the number of Scottish Members of Parliament—the twin-trackers of whom my hon. Friend the Member for Buckingham reminded us—perhaps even as far as the number of Members of the European Parliament who represent Scotland, which is currently eight? Perhaps we should generously allow 15 or 20 Scottish MPs to remain here to talk about UK issues, foreign policy and defence. Why should there be parity with the English? There should be significantly fewer constituencies. They wanted their own Parliament, and now that they have it, they must pay the price for it.

The only attempt that the Labour Government have made so far to address the English question has been to come up with the half-baked, half-hearted notion of English regional development agencies and regional assemblies to go with them. The Government hope that that will buy off the West Lothian question and be the magic answer to it. Of course, it is not for a host of reasons—although there are two primary ones.

There is absolutely no appetite in England for regional government. There is no such thing as the south-west of England. Swindon, towards the east of my constituency, is a great deal closer to Paris than it is to Penzance. Gloucester, which is also in the south-west, is closer to Glasgow than to Penzance. If anything, the south-west is Devon and Cornwall, but to include Bournemouth, Swindon and Gloucester in it is simply nonsense. The same of course applies to the south-east, for example. There is no such thing as the south-east; to try to suggest otherwise and that there will be a Parliament for it is nonsense.

There is no appetite for such government; the Government are merely trying to find some way of answering the unanswerable West Lothian question. Anyhow, no one has ever suggested that regional assemblies should have the right to make primary legislation, as the Scottish Parliament does. There is no link between the two forms of government; the proposed regional government is an attempt to fudge the issue.

Mr. Laurence Robertson (Tewkesbury): Such a proposal may be an attempt to fudge the issue, but is it not slightly more sinister? It is very convenient for there to be all these regions, given the Government's intention to create a federal Europe of regions.

Mr. Gray: I wholly agree with my hon. Friend. I was alarmed the other day to see a European map of Britain on which Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland were marked, but for England all it said was "Regions of the European Union". The word "England" was not mentioned at all. The truth that is known by all of us from England is that England has as strong an identity and place in the world as either Scotland or Wales, but that we have allowed ourselves to forget it.

It is perfectly healthy, and no form of English nationalism, to remind ourselves of that English identity. Perhaps we should consider moving the May bank holiday, for example, from its absurd position of 1 May, and hold it a week earlier, on 23 April, to celebrate St. George's day. Why not be proud of St. George and the dragon? St. George is as great a hero as St. Andrew or St. David. Shakespeare called England

"this blessed plot, this earth, this realm, this England".

The people of England have quietly watched the Scots and the Welsh go their own way, but now is the time for us to assert our English rights. Our English identity must be recognised, and the unbalanced English constitution must be righted. As G. K. Chesterton put it:

"Smile at us, pay us, pass us; but do not quite forget.

For we are the people of England, that never have spoken yet."

As Churchill said, when he was on the other side of the Chamber:

"There is a long-forgotten—nay almost forbidden word, which means more to me than any other. That word is England."

Now is the time for the House to speak for England.

11.21 am

Mr. Nick Harvey (North Devon): I welcome the opportunity to speak in this debate, as I think that the hon. Member for North Wiltshire (Mr. Gray) has made some very interesting points. Although I think that he was a little harsh to say that there has been no response from

the Government to the West Lothian question, it is certainly true that there has been no convincing response to the challenge that is posed by devolution to Scotland and Wales. I should make it clear that I welcome moves to devolution in Scotland and in Wales, but I also recognise that devolution has implications for England, many of which have been touched on by the hon. Gentleman.

One of the contributions towards answering the West Lothian question has to be devolution to the English regions. The hon. Member for North Wiltshire and I disagree on that issue. However, I think that he was right to say that devolution to the English regions will not in itself be an answer to the West Lothian question.

I believe that the hon. Gentleman was wrong when he said that there is absolutely no appetite for English devolution. A recent MORI poll found that two thirds of voters would like decisions to be made closer to home. We are one of the most centralised nations in the democratic world. Far too much is decided at Westminster and in Whitehall that people would instinctively welcome being decided nearer to home, at a more community level.

Mr. Laurence Robertson: Is that not the purpose of local councils?

Mr. Harvey: That is not the purpose of local councils. Local councils are responsible for running public services in their communities.

Although many services in this country are operated on a regional level, those regions are not conterminous from one sphere of public service to another. We have one set of health regions; we have different Departments operating in completely different regions; and we have the media operating in still different regions. Every organisation in this country divides itself to form a regional footprint of one sort or another, and there is absolutely no commonality between them in how they do so. We are almost unique in the democratic world in doing that.

Some people say that because England is small geographically, there is no need for division into the provinces, states or regions into which other countries divide themselves. I appreciate that point, but in England we are trying to organise public services for far greater numbers of people on the basis of a far more centralised footprint than almost any other country in the world. I therefore believe that, over time, there will be more demand for devolution in England.

I entirely agree with the hon. Member for North Wiltshire that, currently, either in his constituency or in mine, there is not a clamour for the creation of a south-west regional parliament.

Mr. Eric Forth (Bromley and Chislehurst): Will the hon. Gentleman tell us, as he develops his remarks, whether he would retain parish councils, district councils, county councils and regional councils—plus this place, plus the European Parliament? If so, how would he explain that to his taxpayers?

Mr. Harvey: I have every intention of addressing that issue, and shall come to it in just a few moments.

Mr. Maclean: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Harvey: No; I shall make a little progress, if I may.

We organise services regionally, but in a very muddled and inconsistent manner. I agree with the hon. Member for North Wiltshire that the footprint being used by the Government's regional offices, which is being duplicated for tomorrow's European elections, is simply wrong, and that the boundaries that they use make absolutely no sense. The boundaries are slightly more sensible in the north of England than in the midlands. However, in the south of England, it is sheer nonsense to suggest that one should pass through only two regions in driving from Penzance to Dover, which is a distance equivalent to that from London to Edinburgh. As a result of that nonsense, there is certainly much less support for moving towards regionalism in the south of England than there is in the north.

Unlike the hon. Gentleman, I very much agree with the Government's moves to establish regional development agencies. My only regret is that the agencies do not have bigger budgets and greater powers. However, I hope that, over time, those will come. Currently, although the RDAs' budgets total about £800 million, all but 10 per cent. of that is simply funds drawn together from schemes that already existed and put under a different form of management.

I recently met the chairman and chief executive of the south-west RDA, which is making good progress in developing an ambitious but realistic economic strategy. Like me, however, I think that people at the RDA are concerned that the scale of their success will be limited by the lack of resources and freedoms available to them.

Regional chambers are developing alongside RDAs. In a sense, the chambers are an embryo of directly elected regional assemblies, which I also welcome. However, at least for the time being, the chambers are nothing more than talking shops. The Deputy Prime Minister has been rather slow in designating chambers as the official bodies that the RDAs must consult, and that has not enhanced the RDAs' credibility. Nevertheless, we are able to see where the Government are beginning to go with the policy.

I disagree with the hon. Member for Tewkesbury (Mr. Robertson) that the Government's policy on regional devolution is part of a ghastly plot to do away with the nation state, but believe that it will simply put us on the same basis established by other nation states.

Mr. Christopher Gill (Ludlow): Does the hon. Gentleman appreciate the fact that whenever hon. Members talk about taking powers from this Parliament to other bodies—whether to the European Parliament, regional assemblies or to any other devolved body—they are really talking about depreciating and devaluing the importance of this House of Parliament and the importance and relevance of its Members?

Mr. Harvey: The starting point of my speech was that Britain is too centralised. Therefore, if we decentralise, we shall by definition be taking powers away from this House. Personally, I have no great paranoia about that. In a sense, we are too centralised, and it would be a good thing to decentralise. I think that my constituents would welcome the idea of decisions being made nearer to where they live.

Mr. Bercow: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Harvey: No; I shall make more progress, if I may.

[Mr. Harvey]

I have mentioned the fact that the boundaries are not realistic, and that they should be revisited before we go any further down the devolution path. However, the Government must themselves take the lead in using a common definition of "region", and they should ensure that Departments that currently are not organised according to the regional footprint become so organised. Nevertheless, as I said, that will be only part of the solution to the West Lothian problem, and it cannot be the whole solution.

Neither I nor anyone else would want different English regions to have different criminal laws, different school systems or leaving ages, or completely different health provision systems; and we certainly would not want people in the east midlands to drive on the left, while those in the west midlands drove on the right. Therefore, many important issues will still have to be decided at Westminster in primary legislation. Once certainly cannot say that devolution to the regions is the whole answer to the West Lothian question, because it certainly is not. That brings us to the West Lothian question.

I agree with the hon. Member for North Wiltshire that, in the long term, it is not sustainable for Scottish and Welsh Members of Parliament to come to this place to vote on and run English services. The issue will come to a head most particularly when we have a general election with the type of outcome to which the hon. Gentleman referred. It is entirely possible that, in a tighter general election, on current party lines, there could be a Labour majority across the United Kingdom, but a Conservative majority in England. I have no difficulty with that. It would not result in a constitutional crisis. The situation would be similar if we had a Conservative majority across the UK and a Labour majority in the Scottish Parliament. We should not be hugely concerned about that.

Mr. Bercow *rose—*

Mr. Harvey: The hon. Gentleman has been dying to get in, so I shall give him his moment.

Mr. Bercow: I am most grateful to the hon. Gentleman for charitably giving way. To prevent the House from being enveloped in a fog of confusion, would he care to answer two simple questions? First, does he, individually or on behalf of his party, believe that twin-tracking—or, as some people impolitely call it, double troughing—whereby a Member of this House is also a Member of the Scottish Parliament, is in principle wrong? Secondly, given that he has said that he has no objection to a decentralisation of powers, are we to take it that he objects to the centralisation of powers? If so, will he explain his tergiversation on entry to the euro, which manifestly involves the centralisation of power in the European Union?

Mr. Harvey: I am not sure that entry to the euro has anything to do with constitutional reform in England and the balance between England, Scotland and Wales which we are discussing.

I do not favour a permanent dual mandate, but it is a reasonable interim arrangement when a new body is brought into being. The rules that will not permit that beyond the next round of elections are a sensible balance.

I do not support the ideas of the hon. Member for Billericay (Mrs. Gorman) on the creation of a separately elected English Parliament, but there is nothing wrong with this House sitting in English session, excluding the representatives of Scottish constituencies, when it is discussing English business. Similarly, there is no difficulty with English and Welsh Members sitting together here when English and Welsh matters are being discussed.

Mr. David Davis (Haltemprice and Howden) *rose—*

Mr. Harvey: I note the right hon. Gentleman trying to get in, but time is pressing and I am supposed to keep to a time limit, so if he will forgive me I shall not let him in at the moment.

The right hon. Member for Bromley and Chislehurst (Mr. Forth) asked about the different layers of government. The Government have already said in two or three places that, before any region had a regional assembly, there would have to be unitary systems of local government. I entirely agree. It would be unacceptable for taxpayers to have a district council, a county council and a regional assembly, so unitary systems of local government would be a prerequisite, but I hope that that would not be brought about by means of the ludicrous and farcical commission process that we went through under the previous Government, under the chairmanship of Sir John Banham.

To sum up, we live in the most centralised nation in the world. It is essential to introduce some devolution in England, but that is not a solution to the West Lothian question. It will still be necessary for English Members to sit here alone as an English body when discussing English business.

11.33 am

Mrs. Teresa Gorman (Billericay): When people went to the polling booths at the general election, I am sure that they did not realise that Labour was planning the restructuring of our constitution. The party had no intention of making that clear. Since the election, six constitutional Bills have come before the House, providing for change in Scotland, Wales, Northern Ireland and London, as well as reform of the Lords and, most significantly, the creation of regional assemblies. Those issues have not been linked in the public mind as a massive change in the constitutional structure that has served us very well for generations, giving us a remarkable amount of peace. We have never seen refugees moving around our country, or the disturbances and turmoil that we see to this day in Europe.

The harmony that we have enjoyed is being disrupted in the most irresponsible way by the Labour Government, purely for political advantage. They see the process as a way of establishing their power in the Chamber into the foreseeable future. They also want to bring us closer to the European structure. As my hon. Friend the Member for North Wiltshire (Mr. Gray), whom I congratulate heartily on securing the debate, has pointed out, the hidden agenda for England involves the Committee of the Regions, which is part and parcel of the Maastricht treaty.

It is no accident that England has been left out of the referendums, which I am sure that the Liberal Democrats greatly support. I am astonished that the hon. Member for

North Devon (Mr. Harvey) could want yet another layer of government. Perhaps the Liberal Democrats think that people have bottomless pockets to pay for such structures. The Scottish Parliament is already predicted to cost £50 million a year, but we all know that that will be a massive underestimate. We have already said that some people will be drawing twin salaries for popping up and down on first-class flights between here and Edinburgh to poke their nose into English affairs whenever it suits the Labour party to sway a vote one way or another. They will be able to vote on matters of domestic importance to England.

Sir Robert Smith (West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine): There is no first-class fare between Scotland and England on British Airways.

Mrs. Gorman: I thank the hon. Gentleman for that information. Private enterprise has clearly cottoned on to the fact that the Scots are canny with their money and do not want to waste it.

Mr. Forth: It is our money.

Mrs. Gorman: With our money, then; I bet that they travel first class if they come down by train.

The issue is well illustrated by one of the Labour party's thinkers, as I believe that he is known—the right hon. Member for Hartlepool (Mr. Mandelson), who has recently fallen from grace in his party, but who occupied a prominent position in its thinking and strategy. He announced at a meeting of the European Movement in March 1998:

"The era of pure representative democracy is slowly coming to an end. Democracy and legitimacy need constant renewal."

I am sure that we all agree with that fairly bland statement. He then said:

"They need to be redefined with each generation. Representative government is being complemented by more direct forms of involvement from the Internet to Referenda."

Remarkably, he missed out England, where 48 million of our population reside, when offering referendums.

Two years ago, I promoted a Bill calling for a referendum on whether the people of England wanted a Parliament for England. I used that term advisedly. It has nothing to do with nationalism; it has to do with fairness. As my right hon. Friend the Member for Haltemprice and Howden (Mr. Davis) has frequently pointed out, there is no justification for leaving the people of England out of decisions on their future, when that courtesy has been paid to the people of Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland.

Our country is to be sold off in a gigantic boot sale, a bit at a time, to Europe so that it can dispose of us and our long-established traditions. The institutions that we take for granted, including this place and the other House, which is currently being blitzed by Labour, are tremendously important for the stability of our nation. They have proved their worth over generations and we disturb them at our peril. One of the basic tenets of membership of this House is that we are all equal and our rights to speak in debates and our ability to influence legislation are equal, but Labour's policies for Scotland and Wales have disturbed that.

Labour is not the only party involved. Historically, it was a Conservative Prime Minister, Lord Salisbury, who gave the Scottish people a Scottish Office to deal with domestic issues. There was no great need for a new Parliament in Scotland because many of the decisions have always been made within the Scottish Office and that tradition has continued, particularly in education and law, and we have all learned lessons from that. There has been no particular political animosity in the Conservative party towards Scotland, but I know that that issue has been played up by the Scottish nationalists.

Mr. Bercow: Does my hon. Friend agree that it is indicative of the sheer indifference to the wishes and interests of the people of England that there is not a single Labour Back Bencher sitting behind the Minister?

Mrs. Gorman: That is a telling point. However, in the Tea Room, quietly and out of earshot of the those on the Government Front Bench, I have heard murmurings among Labour Beck Benchers—when they can be bothered to turn up—about their considerable misgivings over what the Government are doing to our country. Now that they are beginning to find a little courage, I hope that they will put in their fourpenny worth on this issue.

As I was saying, the Conservative party has never done anything to bring about disturbances such as we are seeing now. Indeed, more recently than Lord Salisbury, Winston Churchill created the post of a Minister for Wales and gave Wales a seat at the Cabinet table within the United Kingdom Government—and that is what matters.

Naturally, the Labour Government would prefer to keep the Union alive—the Prime Minister has said that on a number of occasions. Of course that is what they want because it provides Celtic voting fodder at Westminster. The Scots and Welsh will be able to represent views here, particularly on budgetary issues which, as has already been pointed out, will be grossly imbalanced to the disadvantage of the English taxpayer.

There is no question of the English people tolerating such a situation indefinitely. If the Government believe in referendums, as the right hon. Member for Hartlepool has stated, is it not time that they decided that those of us who live in England, including those of Scottish and Welsh origin and others from all over the globe, should have a say? We have taxation without representation in parts of the United Kingdom that will be disposing of the money, whereas the people in Scotland and Wales will have representation within their Parliament and Assembly without the need to raise the funds to back it up. We have already seen the problems that that is likely to cause.

The hon. Member for North Devon talked about more regional devolution of power. I wonder whether he has any idea what the powers will be or their limit. We have already pointed out the ludicrous nature of a separate transport policy in different regions—but it is possible. We saw such an anomaly immediately after the election of the Scottish Parliament, when the Labour party needed to get into bed with the Liberal Democrats. There was a hoo-hah about whether they would overturn their own Government's policy on higher education funding. Such anomalies will develop all over the country and we will have fratricide. People will contend with each other for funds. There will be animosity, and the harmony, which, as I have said, is vital to the success of our country, will be damaged.

Mr. Maclean: I am sure that my hon. Friend is not exaggerating the different policies that may be in

[Mr. Maclean]

operation. The lesson we have learned from the Lib-Lab pact in Scotland is that the Liberals were so desperate to get jobs and to become Deputy First Ministers that they backed down on their election promises and got into bed at the Government's price. There was no real dissension.

Mrs. Gorman: That is what happens when the Government are broken into bits and pieces and start doing deals. The same applies to proportional representation as a form of election.

Sir Robert Smith: In the spirit of the hon. Lady's belief that proportional representation is bad, she could solve the problem of the need for deals in the Scottish Parliament by urging every Scottish Conservative elected by PR—there would be no Conservatives without it—not to attend the Parliament or to vote. That would solve the problem.

Mrs. Gorman: The ludicrous nature of the hon. Gentleman's remarks will preclude me from allowing him any more interventions.

As my hon. Friend the Member for North Wiltshire has pointed out, England is being wiped off the map. It is no accident but is part of the Labour Government's policy, which they are not prepared to declare openly to the British people. The Conservative party is making that clear and will continue to do so. We see the passions of patriotism beginning to stir in the breasts of those who live in England. I hope that the people of England who, as we know, have yet to be made fully aware of the implications for their back pockets as well as their hearts and minds, will, in the not-too-distant future, decide that the party which embraces their cause—the Conservative party, which has always believed in the Union of this country—will stand up for their right to be treated equally with the rest of the United Kingdom. They will then put the Labour party back where it belongs—on the Opposition Benches.

11.46 am

Mr. Christopher Gill (Ludlow): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for North Wiltshire (Mr. Gray) on obtaining this debate and on the lucid and logical presentation of his argument. It was a delight to listen to. I should like to pay tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for Billericay (Mrs. Gorman) who can take credit for having broached this subject initially. She put it on the political agenda. Many people are grateful to her for doing so and for all she does to keep it in the public eye.

My hon. Friend the Member for North Wiltshire has recited many of the problems that exist today. He mentioned the West Lothian question and the problems created by the Barnett formula. He explained that both those problems have been exacerbated by Welsh and Scottish devolution which, in turn, is leading to the burgeoning demand for an English Parliament.

I should like to broaden the debate by drawing the House's attention to other problems. There is potential for the break-up of the United Kingdom. That was mentioned by my hon. Friend the Member for Tewkesbury (Mr. Robertson) in an intervention when he rightly identified that as being part of a recognisable policy from the European Union so that ultimately we have a Europe controlled, governed and ruled through the regions rather than through national Parliaments.

We are seeing the deliberate destruction of the United Kingdom constitution, ruthlessly pushed forward by the new Labour Government. It is consistent with the views of those in the Councils of the European Commission who want to see the power of national Parliaments reduced.

The other problems essentially concern the upper House. The new Labour Government know that their first move is to abolish the power of the hereditaries. We all know that that is their policy and, to give credit where it is due, they made no secret of it because it was in their election manifesto. However, many of us depart from the Labour Government because we recognise that they do not have a living clue what the next move will be. So, in addition to the problems caused by the West Lothian question, the Barnett formula and the burgeoning demand for an English Parliament we have the problems in the upper House. The argument rages back and forth as to whether we should have an upper House elected by universal suffrage or one that is appointed. If it is to be appointed, it is obvious that we would be increasing the patronage power of the Executive. There are some who argue that we should have a mix of the two.

Mr. Maclean: I am listening carefully to my hon. Friend's excellent, powerful and fascinating speech. However, I take issue with him on one point. I think that the Government and the Prime Minister know exactly what they want to do in the other place. They have made their first move to abolish hereditary peers and they do not intend to have another replacement chamber elected democratically or by any other means. Quite clearly they intend the Prime Minister to appoint his own placemen and to continue that for the next 20, 30 or 50 years.

Mr. Gill: My right hon. Friend makes a very powerful point and I do not resile from it. That is very likely the Government's intention. If it is, what I am about to suggest is even more pertinent than I originally anticipated. If the intention is to make the upper House an extension of the power of the patronage of the Prime Minister and the Executive, surely the House of Commons would wish to question that.

We should use the opportunity created by Lords reform to try to deal with as many as possible of the existing problems. I have instanced several of them. We must now be prepared to consider the creation of a United Kingdom federal Parliament sitting on the red Benches in the upper House and an English Parliament sitting on the green Benches here. That would eliminate at a stroke four real and readily identifiable problems.

The duties and responsibilities of the federal Parliament would be essentially those appertaining to defence, foreign affairs, law and order and Treasury, with all other functions devolved to the English and Scottish Parliaments and the Welsh and Northern Ireland Assemblies. Admittedly, my proposal envisages a unicameral system, but it has to be recognised that the precedent for a unicameral system has already been well and truly established by Scottish and Welsh devolution.

What is more important is that the proposal eliminates any possibility of turf wars between the two elected Chambers. In addition, because the federal Parliament

would be elected by universal suffrage, it removes the prospect of an upper Chamber filled partially or entirely with placemen. The question of competing claims for democratic legitimacy as between two House of Parliament simply would not arise in those circumstances.

A federal Parliament comprising Members returned by unitary authorities and counties would bind the United Kingdom together at a time when its historical cohesiveness is under threat as never before. It would solve the West Lothian question, end the inequity of the Barnett formula, satisfy the English dimension and represent an intelligible and practical solution to an otherwise intractable problem.

As an addendum, it goes without saying that elections to the United Kingdom federal Parliament must be by the first-past-the-post system so as to ensure that as far as is humanly possible, ultimate power rests with the people and is not handed to the political parties.

11.54 am

Mr. David Maclean (Penrith and The Border): I regret that the time has come to take seriously the question of an English Parliament. I say that not because I am a devoted fan of the concept of an English Parliament or English nationalism, but because I passionately believe in the United Kingdom and keeping what we can of our United Kingdom Parliament. However, the United Kingdom is heading for destruction and so is the United Kingdom Parliament because of the unbalancing carried out by the Government in the past two years.

Scotland will have its own Parliament and Wales its own Assembly. I suspect that in order to do any deal at any price in Northern Ireland, the Government will settle for anything there, so we can assume that at some time, sooner rather than later, there will be independent Government in Northern Ireland. This Parliament will be left quite unbalanced in its rights, duties and responsibilities.

The United Kingdom Parliament has worked because in this Chamber we were all equals. Admittedly, the Prime Minister, primus inter pares, is slightly more equal than others as are the rest of the Government, with their unique duties. Nevertheless, attempts were made to make sure that we represented roughly the same number of constituents with a unique formula built in for Scotland giving Scottish Members fewer constituents and therefore slightly greater powers. However, that was part of our settlement and it was acceptable as long as we had a United Kingdom Parliament in which all Members had equal voting rights. When we walk through this Lobby or that, we do so as individuals and a vote on one side is worth exactly the same as a vote on the other side.

From 1 July, however, that will no longer be the case as there will be 12 double troughers: six Scottish Nationalists, two Liberal Democrats and five Labour. A number of Members of the Scottish Parliament, who yesterday were voting themselves bigger salaries or allowances, will also sit in this House as Members of the United Kingdom Parliament. The nonsense will be that 72 Members representing Scottish constituencies will continue to sit in this House with the right to vote on everything in my constituency and the constituencies of all my right hon. and hon. Friends from England, but they will have no right to vote on those issues in Scotland and nor will we. That will unbalance the House. Therefore I say to the Government, not with any sense of glee because it fills me with great distress, that they will cause the destruction of the United Kingdom.

This Parliament has worked rather like a centrifuge. If each side is loaded equally, it can spin at any speed and turn a great number of revolutions without destruction, but if one side of the centrifuge is overloaded, it will become unbalanced and inevitably destroy the whole machine. While we are still a United Kingdom, I can say to my constituents in Cumberland, just south of the Scottish border where there is an appalling stretch of M6 dual carriageway—the so-called Cumberland gap—that the Government are spending 24 per cent. more on roads in Scotland than they are on roads in England, but as part of United Kingdom policy, wealthier areas subsidise poorer ones.

Last weekend, some of my constituents pointed out to me that now that the Scots have their own Parliament, why should we tolerate Scottish MPs and MPs being able to vote on budgetary decisions in England which allocate their own constituencies 25 per cent. more money than English constituencies. The Minister for Transport, the right hon. Member for Airdrie and Shotts (Mrs. Liddell) is one of the grossest and vilest examples of that. We have a Labour Minister from Glasgow dictating roads policy in England when she and other Ministers from Scotland have the benefit of higher financial rewards for their own constituencies. I shall not labour the point any more, but my constituents have spotted it and they do not like it.

Something must done about those injustices. They are not just perceived injustices, given that the Government have now created two classes of Member of Parliament in this House—those who get the money and those who have to vote it through but have no rights to it. Creating two classes of Member of Parliament here will destroy this House in its present form.

We must go down the route suggested by my hon. Friend the Member for Ludlow (Mr. Gill), which would be an acceptable solution. The Government have decided to give Scotland its independence, and Wales its semi-independence. Let us make no bones about it—Scotland will be independent sooner rather than later. One cannot be 95 per cent. pregnant—one cannot be 95 per cent. independent. Having given the Scots almost complete independence, the Government have discovered that the Scots have said, "Thank you, but we want a little more." The Government have not understood that reaction.

Sooner rather than later, Scotland will be independent, yet Scottish Members of Parliament will have unique voting rights in this House on domestic English matters. The only way in which we can keep something of our United Kingdom is by moving to a federal system. I despised such a system until last year, when I saw it as possibly the only solution. If Scotland has its own Parliament deciding on health, roads, education and other devolved matters—and Wales has the same—it makes sense to consider a similar solution for England, so that those matters are decided by English Members of Parliament and by English taxpayers, making the most of the budget that they have been allocated, or any extra money that they wish to raise by their own taxation powers.

However, for the sake of the defence and security of this country—and our voting clout in Europe—let us not destroy the United Kingdom. For defence, security and

[Mr. David Maclean]

foreign affairs—and for our votes in the Council of Ministers in Europe—let us keep the United Kingdom for those large, federal issues. It grieves me to come to this conclusion, because I believe that our previous system worked well. However, that is gone and there is no point in crying over spilled milk.

Scotland will be independent and Wales is going its own way. Presumably, Northern Ireland will be hived off by the Government to Prime Minister Adams in due course. If we are to keep something of the United Kingdom, the federal system suggested by my hon. Friend the Member for Ludlow must be something at which we look seriously. We could use either this Chamber or the House of Lords, as my hon. Friend suggests.

I am sad that we have had to debate this matter, because I thought in the past that the concept of an English Parliament was unnecessary—and it was. However, an English Parliament is now the only possible solution to the West Lothian question, and in terms of keeping what remains of the United Kingdom intact. It will be the only way to stop the nasty side of English nationalism, which will rise if the perceived injustices continue.

12.3 pm

Mr. David Davis (Haltemprice and Howden): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for North Wiltshire (Mr. Gray) on obtaining this debate, which relates to matters of enormous constitutional importance. However, the field of argument is populated by more than its fair share of canards, Aunt Sallies, delusions and mirages, some of which I shall endeavour to knock down.

The Minister has argued that the case for an English Parliament originates solely from some unpleasant form of English nationalism. That is not remotely true—certainly not in my case. My hon. Friend the Member for Billericay (Mrs. Gorman)—who has played a sterling part in bringing this issue forward—said that I have always argued that this is not an issue of nationalism, but of fairness and duty. It is an issue of fairness to English constituents, who have had their democracy diluted—a democratic deficit has been created for them—and it is an issue of duty on our part. Just as we can no more give away the sovereignty of our country on behalf of our constituents as their representatives, neither can we allow their democracy to be diluted and undermined. That is taking away from them something which they own and we do not.

This is an issue primarily of primary legislation. I had some sympathy with some of the points made by the hon. Member for North Devon (Mr. Harvey), but he did not spend long dealing with that issue. Like my right hon. Friend the Member for Penrith and The Border (Mr. Maclean), I favour an English Parliament not from a sense of romance and emotion—although there is plenty of romance and emotion about feeling English—but through a clinical application of logic. Like my right hon. Friend, I would not have started from here, if I had been given the choice. I think that the United Kingdom's original arrangements were viable, and they were admired by many other democracies. However, we do not have that choice any more.

Now, it is possible for the United Kingdom Parliament to be unrepresentative of an English nation, but to legislate for that English nation against the political will of that English nation. I arrived at my conclusion by eliminating all the other options—a sort of Conan Doyle approach. All the other proposals would lead, unfortunately and inevitably, to a constitutional crisis of one sort or another.

We have heard talk of English-designated days, English-designated legislation or an English Grand Committee. Let us imagine how that would work where the UK Parliament was of a different political persuasion from the English Members of that Parliament. People talk of Labour and Tories in this context. Frankly, we are designing a constitution for centuries, not years or days. Therefore, we must allow for the fact that there might be two completely different parties dealing with this system.

In circumstances where there were different political persuasions in the UK Parliament, the UK Government would have come to power on the basis of a manifesto which would have included policies relating to transport and health—issues that are massively important to the voters who put them there. They come top of the salience league when people are elected—they are what our electors care about most.

Mr. Harvey: If a system had emerged where the English Parliament was responsible for those matters while the UK Parliament had a completely different set of responsibilities, why would the Government come to power on that platform? Surely their platform would be different.

Mr. Davis: That is precisely my point. My argument concerns what would happen if there were not an English Parliament, but an English Grand Committee, or English-designated legislation or English-designated days. In those circumstances, the UK Government could propose a health Bill which, because it would be an English health Bill, would be defeated. The Executive would be defeated time and time again on principle planks of their manifesto. How long would this Government put up with that situation? Straight away we would have a major constitutional crisis.

It is for that reason that I come to the inevitable conclusion—with no great pleasure—that we need an English Parliament. It could sit in this place, and I am happy with the proposal made by my hon. Friend the Member for Ludlow (Mr. Gill), which is a perfectly sensible option. There are many other options as to where it sits, how it is chosen and whether it includes people who are already Members of the UK Parliament.

We must have an English Executive. If we have anything other than that, we cannot solve the problem. That is why I arrive at my position—not by emotion or sentiment, but by the elimination of the other possibilities. If we choose the other possibilities, we will have a constitutional crisis, and then we really will have a problem with English nationalism. At that point, the English will feel badly treated.

I have one minute to deal with some of the canards, so I shall be brief. It is argued that such conflict does not happen very often, but we are legislating for centuries. If it happens once, it is a problem, and in centuries it will happen much more often.

Some argue that an English Parliament would accelerate the break-up of the Union. My argument is based on my experience in Canada, which has a similar

federal system. There are much greater tensions between Quebec and Ontario than there ever are between Scotland and England, yet the federal system has withstood the pressures.

Some argue that we would play into Europe's hands by taking the federal route. In fact—I speak as an ex-Minister for Europe—the countries that are best at defending themselves against European predations are those that are themselves federal states. Germany is one example. I do not want to pick Belgium as an example, but we should note that it has to ratify European legislation through seven parliaments, so it has a ratchet.

Most of the canards can be seen to be false if one examines them carefully. The only solution that we can ultimately adopt is an English Parliament for the English people, giving democracy to all the British people.

12.11 pm

Mr. Oliver Letwin (West Dorset): This has been an astonishing debate, first because the issues raised by my hon. Friend the Member for North Wiltshire (Mr. Gray) are perhaps among the most serious that face the nation today and secondly because—with the honourable exception of the hon. Member for Linlithgow (Mr. Dalyell), whom one would have expected, above all other hon. Members, to be present, and who has been present in so far as his diary has permitted—we have witnessed the entire absence of interest on the part of the very large number of Labour Members.

My right hon. and hon. Friends would agree that that is remarkable. It arises not from any lack of interest in Adjournment debates as such but from the fact that Labour Members, and the Government, do not regard these issues as serious. They do not think that there is a problem. We owe my hon. Friend the Member for North Wiltshire a great debt for bringing a very real problem to our attention.

Mr. Tam Dalyell (Linlithgow): There is a packed meeting of the parliamentary Labour party upstairs, with the Home Secretary addressing us on the question of asylum. One ought to view these matters in proportion.

Mr. Letwin: That may well be part of the explanation. I shall be most interested to see whether Labour Members show any real interest in the subject by raising it themselves on other occasions.

The Government have for most of the past two years taken the position that there is not a problem. I shall be very surprised if the Minister tells us anything other than that the Government do not think that anything needs to be done, with the possible exception of the creation of regional government in England. Some of my hon. Friends animadverted to that subject, but only the hon. Member for North Devon (Mr. Harvey) went into it in any detail.

The idea of regional government in England is far worse even than my hon. Friend the Member for North Wiltshire suggested. We could add another layer of government and generate the huge paradox of accountability of no one having the slightest idea at which level various decisions are made. We are perilously close to that even now. The paradox is that the larger the number of forms of government we have, the less we can hold any of them to account, because the less idea we have about their actions.

The hon. Member for North Devon had a solution: to abolish county councils—and district councils, for all I know—and regionalise. That would move us in the opposite direction: far from bringing government down towards people, it would take it up away from them. Worse than that, the Government do not plan to introduce regional government in any rational form. They are suggesting regional referendums—no doubt without any rules to make them fair—and if, for example, the north-east, and no other area, voted in favour, we would have the bizarre arrangement of not only Scotland and Wales but other areas creating further imbalance in the constitution. I cannot imagine any less satisfactory form of dynamic constitution making.

Several of my right hon. and hon. Friends, absolutely rightly, said that the move towards regionalisation was part of a deeper plot. I do not know whether the Minister is part of that plot or whether the Government are aware that they are part of it. Much that happens in relation to our gradual absorption into a federal united states of Europe is not designed by anyone in this country; we merely fall into it by a series of lapses of attention. The European Commission has demonstrated its clear intention, in a series of remarkably well argued and powerful cases, proposed in various studies and in the maps to which my right hon. and hon. Friends have referred, that we should end with a Europe of the regions, without England, and indeed without the United Kingdom as an entity.

For all those reasons, the Conservative party is, and will remain, wholly opposed to the regionalisation of England as a solution to the West Lothian question. Moreover, such a move would require giving primary legislative powers to the regions, and that is not in the Government's, let alone anyone else's, wildest ambitions, so it does not even constitute the beginning of a solution.

How do we tackle the West Lothian problem? Conservative Members have lucidly and powerfully illustrated why it needs to be tackled: the imbalances and the sense of unfairness to which the current situation will increasingly give rise. There must be a solution. We must come up with a set of policies to begin to diminish what will otherwise be a growing feeling of unfairness.

My right hon. and hon. Friends have, to a man—and a woman—argued with eloquence in favour of various forms of the solution broadly known as an English Parliament, which is in a sense a misnomer, because it really means an English Executive or Government, together with an assembly or parliament with primary legislative powers. I understand the reasons behind that view, as well as the objections advanced by my right hon. Friend the Member for Haltemprice and Howden (Mr. Davis) to other solutions, but I think that my right hon. and hon. Friends may have understated the difficulties attending the proposition that there should be an English parliament and an English Government.

There is no problem in principle about having a parliament within a federal state, as many countries operate such a system and we are now in the process of operating it vis-à-vis Scotland, but there is a problem if there is an imbalance between one part of the kingdom and another, and the fact is that, regardless of whether the situation is desirable, England is overwhelmingly larger, richer and more powerful than Scotland, and its Parliament and Government would be overwhelmingly larger and richer—and, I suspect, more powerful—than

[Mr. Letwin]

any federal government. It would certainly be responsible for the great bulk of the taxation and spending in the United Kingdom.

Mr. Gray: What is wrong with that?

Mr. Letwin: I am saying not that there is anything wrong with that in itself, but that it would cause difficulties for a federal Government, supposedly responsible for macro-economic policy, if they could not control the great bulk of fiscal policy and expenditure. I beg my right hon. and hon. Friends to attend to that issue, which needs serious consideration before we leap in the direction of an English Parliament.

My right hon. Friend the Member for Haltemprice and Howden asked whether a federal UK Government, if one were brought about by the creation of an English Government, would be able to maintain sufficient national confidence in the face of a powerful English Government to hold its own in the European Union. All my right hon. and hon. Friends would agree that any federal government should have such an ambition.

Because of such problems we need to pause before launching ourselves into the idea of an English Parliament. We must ask whether there is any other less dramatic solution that might address the West Lothian question, while not suffering from those drawbacks.

The range of options that my right hon. and hon. Friends have described, including giving a veto over English legislation to Members of this House who represent English constituencies, are serious possibilities. I do not think that they would necessarily create constitutional crises, but I see that they would create constitutional tensions.

I fear that what the Government have created, and the problems to which it has given rise, make it impossible to conceive of a solution that is wholly perfect for this country, configured as we are. I do not think that regional government gives us the beginning of an answer. I see that an English Parliament and an English Government would give us one answer, but an answer that involves real difficulties. I do not argue that a veto for English Members over English legislation, or any of the other variants, gives us a perfect solution, but those ideas may have fewer deficiencies than that of an English Parliament.

In any event, this is the terrain on which we need to hold the debate. We need to admit that there is a problem and to agree that it needs a solution, and that we need to discuss urgently as a nation—with the co-operation of the Government, I hope, rather than in the absence of any real interest from them—whether we shall choose an English Parliament, or perhaps some more modest proposal, so as to discover whether that would be a sufficient response.

12.21 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions (Mr. Nick Raynsford): One of the pleasures and privileges of the life of a junior Minister is to be frequently present in the Chamber on Wednesday mornings and at other times when Adjournment debates are taking place. I will have had the pleasure of listening to and responding to two debates this morning, and I must tell the House that there was a marked contrast between the two.

The first was a serious and intelligent debate with high quality contributions from both sides of the House, characterised by an almost total absence of party political jibes, nasty personal attacks, overblown rhetoric and paranoid hyperbole. However, I have to say that—with at least three honourable exceptions, including the hon. Member for West Dorset (Mr. Letwin), who wound up for the Opposition—the tone of this debate has been rather different. At its lowest, it sank to inexcusable and nasty personal attacks on the Minister for Transport, my right hon. Friend the Member for Airdrie and Shotts (Mrs. Liddell). To one of the Opposition Members who made those attacks, I must point out that my right hon. Friend represents Airdrie and Shotts, not Glasgow. It is somewhat odd that a Member who referred to the nasty side of English nationalism should reveal such ignorance about Scotland.

The Government are determined to decentralise power, to open up government, to reform Parliament and to increase individual rights. The Scottish Parliament, the Welsh Assembly, the Northern Ireland Assembly, the Greater London authority and the proposals set out in our local government White Paper are all important examples of how government is being tailored to suit the circumstances of the different areas within the United Kingdom.

The debate about some form of self-government for parts of the United Kingdom seems always to have been with us. The response over the years—from the time of Lord Salisbury, who was mentioned in the debate—has been to provide for increasing administrative devolution, with powers and functions being exercised by the Secretary of State. But that was not matched with arrangements to ensure accountability to the people of Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland—or, indeed, to the people of parts of England. The need for action to address that "democratic deficit" became more and more pressing. Only by taking action to relieve those concerns could we provide a sound framework to maintain and secure the long-term future of the United Kingdom.

Some would argue that devolution means the end of the UK as we know it. That tends to be the cry of those who are resistant to change, and have resisted it over the years. We want there to be change, where appropriate, to address real concerns, because we know that resistance, especially unthinking resistance, to change has given added force to the voices of those who argue that there is no possibility of responding to the legitimate concerns for more devolved government in different parts of the United Kingdom.

Any student of the history of these islands who thinks about the debates in this House more than a century ago, when the idea of some degree of devolution in Ireland was first considered, will recognise the force of the argument that unthinking resistance to change does not guarantee the integrity of the United Kingdom. The Government are determined to support the continued integrity of the United Kingdom by responding to the legitimate concerns of the different elements within the UK who wish to see more devolved power.

Mrs. Gorman: Does the hon. Gentleman agree with the right hon. Member for Hartlepool (Mr. Mandelson)

that referendums are an important part of his party's new democratic outlook? If so, will he explain why the people who live in England are not allowed to have a referendum to express those views—if, indeed, they hold them?

Mr. Raynsford: I have two answers for the hon. Lady. First, I agree with the views expressed by my right hon. Friend the Member for Hartlepool (Mr. Mandelson). Secondly, I must remind her that she is wrong, because one of the referendums involved the people of London, who had an explicit opportunity to say whether they wanted a degree of devolved power within London—power that is currently exercised by the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions, but which will in future be exercised by a democratically elected London mayor. I shall deal with that element in a moment.

The first step in our regional agenda for England was to establish regional development agencies to improve competitiveness and to provide for effective co-ordination of economic development. The RDAs were established last December and became operational on 1 April.

We expect RDAs to become powerhouses for regional economic development. Currently only two English regions exceed the European average in terms of GDP. That cannot be right, and we must take action to tackle that deficit. RDAs are now lead bodies at regional level for co-ordinating inward investment initiatives, raising skills, improving the competitiveness of business, and social and physical regeneration.

Our aim is for RDAs to provide a framework for economic decision making in the regions, and to give a better strategic focus. They need to support and enhance national policies, while addressing the needs of the regions. We are also encouraging the formation of regional chambers to build up the voice of the regions within the current framework.

The hon. Member for North Devon (Mr. Harvey) chided us for the delay in proceedings, but last month we designated the first ever regional chambers—in the north-west, the east midlands and the west midlands. Chambers in other regions are currently under consideration. We are proceeding, as the hon. Gentleman knows, on the basis of consent and the views of the different regions, which, as he acknowledged in his speech, is an appropriate approach. We shall continue in that vein.

The chambers are voluntary groupings of local councillors and representatives of the various sectors with a stake in a region's economic, social and environmental well-being.

Mr. Maclean: Will the Minister give way?

Mr. Raynsford: Very briefly, because I am trying to respond to a debate, and I have been given only 10 minutes in which to do so.

Mr. Maclean: Is the Minister aware that in the north-west, which he has mentioned, the regional chamber is already planning to call itself the north-west regional assembly, and that 70 per cent. of its members are councillors, with not much representation from productive industry?

Mr. Raynsford: The right hon. Gentleman is clearly extremely unhappy about the idea of a chamber or regional assembly in his region, but we believe that it is right that the voices of those who have proper responsibilities in the region should be taken into account. That includes councillors, as well as representatives of other sectors. As I have already said, the chambers are representative of a wider group of people than councillors. As the RDAs are business led, it is appropriate that there should be a counterbalance in the form of the chambers, which involve democratic representation.

We have given the chambers a specific role in relation to RDAs—to help make them responsive to regional views and to give an account of themselves to those with an interest in their work. We also remain committed to move in due course to directly elected regional government where there is a demand for it. How quickly we move in that direction will depend in large part on the success of the RDAs and regional chambers—

Mr. Gray: What about England?

Mr. Raynsford: I am trying to talk about England. *[Interruption.]* If the hon. Gentleman and his hon. Friends, who took a great deal of time to talk in absurdly inflated and extravagant language, had allowed me rather more time—*[Interruption.]*—and were not barracking me now, they might learn something on the subject, instead of pandering to their own prejudices.

Human Rights (Pakistan)

12.30 pm

Mr. Tony Colman (Putney): I begin by expressing my gratitude for this opportunity for a debate on human rights in Pakistan and the related persecution of the millions of Ahmadi people in that country. The worldwide headquarters of the Ahmadi people is in Putney, to where the supreme head of the people has had to move following threats to his life in Pakistan.

The Ahmadis are one of the 72 sects of Islam, although it should be remembered that there are even more sects in Christianity. Within Islam, the Sunni and Shi'ite sects are far larger, but there are about 20 million Ahmadis and the sect is growing quickly. The House of Commons Library estimates that there are about 5 million Ahmadis in Pakistan.

Discrimination against all minority religions in Pakistan is severe. Other hon. Members may wish to mention the plight of Christians, but the laws afflicting the Ahmadis are the most severe, involving life imprisonment and the death penalty for the simple profession of the Ahmadi faith.

The constitution of Pakistan, founded under Muhammed Ali Jinnah in 1948, is based on religious tolerance. Only in 1974 did the Government of Mr. Bhutto amend the constitution to deem Ahmadis to be non-Muslims. In 1984, General Zia ul-Haq passed ordnance 20, which made it a criminal offence, subject to imprisonment, to describe Ahmadis as Muslims. Even after the lifting of martial law in 1985, the constitutional position remained unchanged, and in 1986, the death penalty was introduced for forms of blasphemy—a measure aimed at the Ahmadis in particular.

In 1992, the death penalty was made mandatory. Amnesty International commented at the time that it was concerned that

"under the amended form of Section 295-C of Pakistan's Penal Code, members of the minority Ahmadiyya Community may face the death penalty as a mandatory punishment for the exercise of their religious beliefs."

Of course, they now do. The democratic Governments of Pakistan since then have continued the use of ordnance 20 and the blasphemy laws to persecute the Ahmadis in Pakistan.

Freedom of thought, conscience and religion has long been recognised as the basic human right by all religions and all civilised societies. That right is enshrined in the founding charter of the United Nations, and in the United Nations charter on human rights—both of which have been signed by the Government of Pakistan.

When the then President of Pakistan, General Zia ul-Haq, was told by members of the UN Commission on Human Rights that ordnance 20 contravened the UN charter, he replied that Ahmadis personally offended him, that he was aware that ordnance 20 violated human rights but that he did not care. When she was Prime Minister of Pakistan, Benazir Bhutto said that Ahmadis

"were declared non-Muslim in my father's rule. How can I undo the great service my father did for Islam? My Government will not give any concessions to Ahmadis."

The present Government of Mian Nawaz Sharif follow the same restrictive practice of persecuting members of the Ahmadian movement on any and all charges, which include charges of un-Islamic activities, blasphemy, and even of calling themselves Muslim. During the latest census, many new Ahmadis were prosecuted for declaring themselves to be Ahmadis and Muslims. That shows not only a blatant breach of confidentiality by the Government in releasing such information, but it institutionalises persecution of the Ahmadis at the highest level. However, Pakistan is a peculiar state, which has chosen to legislate and enact laws, such as the recent anti-terrorism provisions, to target Ahmadis and to make the laws more barbarous and unbearable.

I shall give a couple of instances of that. An Ahmadi Muslim was accused by non-Ahmadis that he had preached and propagated his faith to the villagers, and was brought before the specially constituted anti-terrorist court. In spite of strenuous denials, the case was considered proven under Pakistan's penal code ordnance 295-C. He was sentenced to 13 years imprisonment and was fined 100,000 rupees. Only in Pakistan is preaching considered to be a terrorist offence.

Then there is the case of Mirza Ghulam Qader, a high official and a nephew of the supreme head of the Ahmadiyya Muslim community. He was murdered in broad daylight in front of many people. The assassins took refuge in a school and took the children hostage, before being killed in a shoot-out with the police. Large amounts of heavy weaponry, including rocket launchers, sub-machine guns and hand grenades, were recovered from the assassins' vehicle, which I believe pointed to a deeper conspiracy. Within two days, all the recovered weapons disappeared from police custody, leaving no proof or evidence of the offence.

That was only one of the high-profile murders of Ahmadiyya members in Pakistan. In fact, in the past year many members of the community have been murdered in broad daylight in front of witnesses, but no one has been apprehended or prosecuted for the crimes. The murders were all religiously motivated, and the victims included doctors, engineers, lawyers, business men and eminent citizens of their areas.

The Islamic National Front issued a very large prize for the murder of, among others, Mirza Tahir Ahmad, the supreme head of the worldwide Ahmadiyya Muslim community. That news was covered in many well known mass-circulation newspapers in Pakistan on 1 October 1988. The INF declaration said that

"any Muslim warrior who despatches this enemy of Islam to hell will be offered cash prizes of 1 million rupees."

The Government of Pakistan took no action against that incitement to international terrorism.

I should further point out that Pakistan alone among the Islamic states has taken this draconian stance towards the Ahmadis. So what should be done? I was pleased by the answer to a written question in the other place on 13 April this year, which stated that the Government have

"called upon the Government of Pakistan to prevent the misuse of that country's blasphemy laws and to introduce legislation which would abolish the death penalty for blasphemy."—[*Official Report, House of Lords*, 13 April 1999; Vol. 599, c. *118*.]

However, we need to do more to protect the rights of all minorities to freedoms of religion.

Therefore, the following questions suggest themselves. Pakistan is a full member of the United Nations and a signatory to the UN human rights charter. At the next review, would it be possible for the British Government to

take up the case of religious freedom in Pakistan? The US President has already spoken in support of the repeal of ordnance 20.

The UN Commission on Religious Intolerance is taking evidence. Can the Government support the petition of the Ahmadiyya Muslim community in Pakistan, and work to remove the fatwah placed on the supreme head of the Ahmadiyya community, as they have done successfully in other cases?

Pakistan is a member of the Commonwealth, whose human rights initiative, chaired by Dr. Kamal Hussein of Bangladesh, recently published its report on the right to cultural tolerance in all Commonwealth countries. Will the Government ensure that this report is fully debated at the Commonwealth conference in Durban, South Africa, this autumn? Will they also ensure that the situation in Pakistan is brought to the attention of all those present, perhaps in terms of a review of the 1991 Harare declaration, which Pakistan signed? That declaration spoke of

"fundamental human rights, including equal rights and opportunities for all citizens, regardless of race, colour"

or creed.

I hope that my hon. Friend will respond to me in writing in connection with those questions, but an additional question involves all Members of the House. Would it be possible for colleagues, at meetings of the Commonwealth Parliamentary Association, to raise our abhorrence of ordnance 20 and the blasphemy laws? An appropriate opportunity to raise those matters would be that organisation's annual conference this September.

The Ahmadis expect that clerics of other sects or faiths may object to their religion. Their criticism—and mine—is not of that. What is different in this case is that the Pakistani Government have institutionalised and supported such objections with the death penalty or life imprisonment.

The Putney debates of 1647 in St. Mary's church, Putney, speak down the centuries. The belief, which I share, is that it is not the state's responsibility to determine the religion of its subjects. Religion is personal and private. To any Government, all subjects should be equal when it comes to their personal and religious inclinations.

I shall finish by connecting this matter and the Jewish faith. This week is Anne Frank week. On 11 June, the Secretary-General of the Commonwealth, His Excellency Chief Emeka Anyaoku, will sign the Anne Frank declaration for the new millennium on behalf of the Commonwealth nations. It includes a pledge that people should work together for a better world, free of bigotry in the next millennium. Anne Frank was 15 when she died for her faith.

A 14-year-old boy, Nazir Ahmed, is in central prison, Hydrabad, Sind, awaiting sentence under the blasphemy laws as an Ahmadi. The sentence could be life imprisonment or death. Many Pakistanis must be repulsed and disgusted by that. May I recommend to the Government of Pakistan that they think about the fate of Anne Frank, the declaration and that 14-year-old boy, and repeal ordnance 20 and the blasphemy laws forthwith? By doing so they can demonstrate that Pakistan is a full member of the Commonwealth nations for the new millennium.

12.41 pm

Mrs. Virginia Bottomley (South-West Surrey): I congratulate the hon. Member for Putney (Mr. Colman) on securing this important debate. The headquarters of the Ahmadi community lie in his constituency, but I have the privilege of having the Ahmadi education and conference centre, called Islamabad, at Tilford. In the summer, up to 10,000 members of the Ahmadi community from around the world gather there. Tilford is a beautiful Surrey village, and it is a tribute to the community that the Ahmadis are valued, respected and well integrated. Around 25 families live there permanently.

During my time as a Member I have heard appalling tales of unhappiness and discrimination. As the hon. Gentleman said, it is appalling, given that Pakistan is a signatory to the United Nations declaration on human rights, that we cannot take further steps to protect a well-educated, civilised and public-spirited community. In Pakistan, the press is gagged; the judiciary appears to play to the gallery and there are arrests, trumped-up charges and assaults; employment opportunities are constrained; and there is no freedom of speech or religion.

In February, I put a question to the Minister's predecessor, Derek Fatchett. At the same time as the hon. Member for Putney, I received a reply in which Mr. Fatchett said that he had raised the matter during a recent visit to Pakistan. He had been assured by a Minister that the Pakistani Government were determined to ensure that all religious minorities received the rights granted to them by the constitution. That Minister was examining ways of ensuring that religious minorities could play their full part as equal citizens of Pakistan.

Mr. Fatchett said that the Government would monitor closely the situation of the religious minorities in Pakistan and would raise further concerns with the Pakistani Government. In the present climate, we would all agree that that is not enough. The hon. Member for Putney made specific and practical suggestions on how we could put greater weight behind the campaign to ensure that the Ahmadi community's human rights are recognised not only in the United Kingdom, but in Pakistan.

12.43 pm

The Minister of State, Foreign and Commonwealth Office (Mr. Geoffrey Hoon): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Putney (Mr. Colman) on his success in securing a debate that gives the House a timely chance to discuss an important issue that is rightly causing concern here and elsewhere.

From the outset, the Government have ensured that the promotion and observance of human rights has been at the very heart of our foreign policy. Intolerance, wherever it occurs and in whatever guise, is unacceptable. It is particularly disturbing that we are debating intolerance in Pakistan, a country with which Britain has so many links—history, culture, trade, development, sport and, of course, for many, family ties. Ours is a warm relationship of mutual respect, which allows us to speak freely to each other about our respective concerns.

My hon. Friend has specifically raised concerns about Pakistan's Ahmadiyya community. We share his concerns about the position of the Ahmadis, as we do about the position of other religious minorities in Pakistan, including Christians and Hindus. Those responsible for the establishment of Pakistan were wholly committed to

[Mr. Geoffrey Hoon]

religious tolerance. On the day of partition, the founding father of Pakistan, Muhammed Ali Jinnah, inspired and reassured the new citizens of a new nation with the words:

"You may belong to any religion, cast or creed . . . There is no discrimination, no distinction between one community or another."

Those values are reflected in Pakistan's constitution. Article 20 says:

"Subject to law, public order and morality, (a) every citizen shall have the right to profess, practise and propagate his religion; and (b) every religious denomination and every sect thereof shall have the right to establish, maintain and manage its religious institutions."

Unfortunately, while the constitutional framework is clear, particular legal acts continue to give cause for concern, especially the controversial blasphemy laws. Article 295(c) of Pakistan's penal code prescribes the death penalty for those who by words, spoken or written, directly or indirectly, are taken to defile the name of the prophet Muhammed. The law has frequently been misused by groups and individuals to target members of religious minorities. Accusations of blasphemy can lead and have led to death sentences being handed down, although none has yet been carried out.

We have repeatedly asked the Pakistani Government to amend or abolish the blasphemy laws, of which Ahmadis are frequent victims. During our European Union presidency last year, we made representations in May. In October, we joined a further EU initiative about the blasphemy laws. At the recent Human Rights Commission meeting in Geneva, the EU called for abolition of the death penalty for blasphemy.

The Ahmadi community do not believe that Pakistan's constitution gives them full freedom of faith. A constitutional amendment passed in 1974 declares them to be non-Muslim. That resulted in a change to Pakistan's penal code forbidding them the right to practise their religion as Muslims. Specifically, they cannot openly use traditional Islamic words, phrases or greetings without risking arrest and punishment of up to three years imprisonment plus a fine. That law, like the blasphemy laws, is open to abuse.

We know that there is a great deal of worry among the Ahmadis—indeed, among other minorities—about Pakistan's new anti-terrorist law. In particular, there is a fear that the new offence of civil commotion will be abused. Ahmadis have voiced fears that arrest under the blasphemy laws will result in cases being heard by the new anti-terrorist courts, in which there is no right of appeal. We have urged the Pakistani Government to implement the new laws fairly and responsibly.

Another piece of legislation, the Shariah Bill, has given rise to further concern over the position of non-Muslims in Pakistan. Although the Bill, which has yet to pass Pakistan's Senate—where it has failed to achieve the two thirds majority required if it is to become law—specifically protects the rights of religious minorities, there are fears that its wider effects may be to lower tolerance for religious diversity and women's rights. We do not consider that the proposed Bill is inimical to human rights per se, but we have urged on the Pakistani Government that the new law should adhere to internationally accepted human rights standards.

Those concerns relate to individual legal instruments, but the wider public and political atmosphere is equally important. We are worried by signs that general intolerance is on the increase. In relation to the Ahmadis in particular, we were greatly concerned by the recent decision of the Punjab provincial assembly to change the name of the principal Ahmadi town in Pakistan, Rabwah. In the wake of that, two senior Ahmadi leaders, Colonel Ayaz Muhammed and Mirza Masroor Ahmed, were charged under the blasphemy laws. We are watching their cases—and others—closely.

From what I have said, hon. Members will recognise that one of the main problems facing the Ahmadis and other religious minorities in Pakistan is the apparent gap between the protection that Pakistan's constitution gives to religious minorities and the drafting of individual laws and their day-to day implementation.

That is the very point that the late Derek Fatchett made during his visit to Pakistan in February, which the right hon. Member for South-West Surrey (Mrs. Bottomley) mentioned. He raised the issue of religious minorities with Pakistan's Minister of Law. He told the Minister of the great concern in the United Kingdom about the rights of religious minorities in Pakistan. The Minister acknowledged the concern outside Pakistan's borders, but said that there was great concern in Pakistan too. He said that the Government of Pakistan were concerned that all religious minorities received the rights given to them under Pakistan's constitution and that he would consult his colleague, the Minister for Religious Affairs, to examine ways to ensure that members of religious minorities are full and equal citizens of Pakistan. We will continue to keep that situation in mind.

We approach this subject as a concerned friend of Pakistan. It is with that in mind that we regularly raise these issues with the Pakistani Government. I am sure that the House will agree that it is important that we recognise where problems lie, but we must also recognise and acknowledge the efforts being made to put things right. Where we can, we must help those efforts.

It was in that spirit that last month, senior Foreign Office officials discussed a wide range of human rights issues with their Pakistani counterparts in Islamabad. The reports of religious persecution, the blasphemy laws and the anti-terrorist law were among the topics discussed. Pakistani officials acknowledged that religious tolerance was a cultural as well as a legal problem. We will of course continue to follow closely the progress on each issue.

It is important that the legal framework is right, and we will continue to urge the Pakistani Government to ensure that their laws are just and justly enforced. However, the key to changing wider social attitudes is education. Tolerance and respect for other cultures, religions and nationalities can be encouraged and, indeed, taught. It is there that we can make a practical difference.

The UK development programme for Pakistan, run by the Department for International Development, is worth approximately £25 million a year. It places a strong emphasis on improvements in human rights in all its projects and includes regular dialogue with the Government of Pakistan, other donors and advocacy groups in Pakistan about human rights issues. Current projects that are directly tackling human rights in Pakistan include a police training project for senior officers. We also hope to be able to do more to promote access for marginalised groups to the criminal justice system.

The Foreign and Commonwealth Office also sponsors human rights projects in Pakistan. In Karachi, for example, Shell and the FCO have co-sponsored a human rights education project that has produced a human rights textbook on the rights of the child for use in schools It is proving very successful. We are actively pursuing other proposals.

For all the justifiable concern that reports of human rights problems and religious intolerance in Pakistan have caused, I hope that my hon. Friend the Member for Putney will agree that there remain grounds for considerable hope in Pakistan. The vast majority of the Pakistani people believe in the right to worship for each and every individual according to their beliefs. We believe that the Pakistani Government are sincere in wanting to tackle religious intolerance, which damages their country and its international reputation. We will continue to monitor reports of religious intolerance wherever they may occur and to raise our concerns, but change will not occur overnight. We are ready to offer practical help through our development aid programme.

Mr. Colman: I would like my hon. Friend to take up the points that I made—I realise that he has only just heard them—and raise them at the Commonwealth conference in Durban this autumn. In particular, will he take up the essence of the Harare declaration, which is relevant in this situation?

Mr. Hoon: My hon. Friend anticipated my next sentence. I made a detailed note of the thoughtful suggestions in his excellent speech. I shall write to him in detail on each point. I hope that he would prefer a detailed exposition of the Government's response to my perhaps ad hoc observations.

Religious diversity is a fact in Pakistan, as it is in this country and that should be welcomed. Pakistan is the richer for the presence of religious minorities such as Ahmadis, Christians and Hindus, who will all contribute to the future of that great country.

12.55 pm

Sitting suspended.

Telecommunications

1 pm

Mr. Steve Webb (Northavon): I begin with a confession: recently, I have been spending rather a lot of time in the company of Mr. Bill Gates. Not literally, I hasten to add; I suppose that "virtually" would be the way to put it. I have recently acquired two of his books—one of which was free, although I bought the other. The book that has had a great effect on me is "Business at the Speed of Thought". At the end of about 300 pages of Mr. Gates enthusing about the growth in the internet and what he calls "the web life style"—with a name like mine, I am also very enthusiastic about the Webb life style—it is difficult to avoid the sense that, although one suspects that Mr. Gates has his own agenda on the issue, even if only part of what he describes comes true, there is a tremendous opportunity for British business, education and consumers. It is important that we do not miss that opportunity.

My contention, therefore, is that we must get telecommunications regulation right. It is not unfair to say that the present regulation was largely not framed with the internet in mind. I am well aware that the regulation is under urgent review and I hope that we shall hear more about the direction of the thinking on that matter during the debate. I argue that there is a problem and will cite some statistics in evidence. Obviously, there are different statistics showing how far behind Europe is compared with the United States. A report from Jupiter Communications suggests that only 18 per cent. of United Kingdom households are on-line, compared with 44 per cent. in the US. The report notes that, although that gap will close, and in four years' time, the UK figure may have risen to 41 per cent., by that time, the US figure will be 63 per cent. I am sure that the figures will vary according to definitions, but there is clear evidence of a gap and of a problem that needs to be addressed.

Some other problems are tied in with telecommunications regulation issues—for example, telephone communication charging structures and their implication for the structure and location of British business. Once this debate became common knowledge, I received several e-mails, including one from a young man aged 20, who lives in Bradley Stoke in my constituency. He described himself as an internet entrepreneur. I am delighted that such people live in my patch, and look forward to meeting that young man. He tells me that, in his business, the huge cost of local calls—running into thousands of pounds—or the cost of dedicated lines means that he has had to locate and register his business in the United States.

My constituency is home to many high-tech companies—Orange, TeleWest, Hewlett Packard and so on—so it should be a natural home for internet entrepreneurs, even those aged 20. Clearly, if my constituent is being forced to relocate in the US, something somewhere must be wrong.

Mr. Richard Allan (Sheffield, Hallam): Does my hon. Friend agree that there is also a problem in that a business in the US can service European customers throughout Europe more cheaply than a business based in a European country? Does he agree that regulation is necessary to try to get rid of the cost of telecoms crossing national

[Mr. Richard Allan]

boundaries in Europe? Such additional costs make the UK and other European countries uncompetitive compared with the US.

Mr. Webb: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for making those points. As chairman of the Select Committee on Information, he is most knowledgable on such matters. His points tie in with what I was saying. If telecommunications regulation is causing British entrepreneurs to site their businesses—either physically or virtually—in the US or elsewhere, there is clearly a problem to be addressed.

Before considering some possible solutions, I want to consider the problem of whether telecom giants—for want of a better word—are stifling the potential for expansion in this area. For example, I was told, by e-mail, about cable modems; that might be one way of facilitating greater access. Henry Jaremko of QE Data Ltd.—someone I had not met before—told me that he had tried for two years to get BT to sort out a cable modem for him. He was told that the company was considering the matter and researching it. He stated:

"I talk to friends and colleagues in the Netherlands and in America and they are all using cable modems NOW—they pay . . . £30 to £50 a month for the service and they get speeds typically five times faster than an average modem . . . More importantly for the fee . . . they are ONLINE ALL THE TIME."

He put that last phrase in capitals, which means that he was shouting at me. He continued:

"There is no concept of dialling—their computers are permanently wired to the net from their homes or offices."

Mr. Ian Bruce (South Dorset): As they have initiated this welcome debate, I am sure that Liberal Democrats were only too pleased to receive messages. Last night, I had dinner with representatives from several telecoms companies; they told me that, within weeks—literally—we shall receive announcements from several sources about a fixed fee, on-line all the time, to an internet provider. Perhaps, therefore, the hon. Gentleman is wrong to say that we should get the regulation right. The regulation is already in place; the market will provide the solution for the UK. Despite the fact that our telephone calls are already cheap, he is right to identify the problems on the internet side, but I think that the solution will occur soon.

Mr. Webb: I hope that the hon. Gentleman is right. I am sure that the Minister for Small Firms, Trade and Industry will be aware of the latest developments and will be able to brief us on them.

I do not know how new cable modems are, but Mr. Jaremko says that other European companies seem to have managed to take up that new technology. Is BT a slumbering giant? Is that why the company has not moved as fast as it might have done to take up that technology? I have also been briefed about digital subscriber loops. That is a new world to me, but it seems to be another form of technology that would provide a means for extensive internet access. However, again there seems to be a problem with an incumbent supplier, who is perhaps not as innovative as possible.

We have a series of problems. What could be the cause? One obvious candidate—although it is not the sole problem—is the cost of local calls. In the US, local calls are free in many circumstances, whereas in the UK, local calls are metered with a 5p minimum charge. That 5p charge may be relevant when one is going on-line, receiving e-mails and coming off-line, and it may discourage people from doing that regularly. However, my key concern is the metering of local calls and its implications. In terms of e-commerce, I draw an analogy with being charged for window shopping in the high street. Retailers would be appalled if that were the case, yet we make people pay by the minute for window shopping on the internet.

Some people might respond that Freeserve has come in and everyone is on-line so the problem is solved. However, we are talking not only about people being on-line, but about using the internet as part of their "life style"—as a servant in business, education and leisure. Being on-line and having access is only part of the battle, we then have to use the thing. There is evidence that usage increases when metered charges are abolished and replaced with fees. When America OnLine moved from one structure to the other in 1996, monthly use went up from an average of 14 minutes to 33 minutes over three months. The average figure is now an hour a day for that company. Of course, there are limits, but, if the internet is to be a servant and is to be part of our lives, we must remove the marginal cost to a greater or a lesser extent.

The Minister will probably recall that, when I wrote to him on this subject, his response was that average telecom charges are low in the UK. However, I am concerned not only with the average, but with the margins. Once one is on-line and has paid the set-up costs, one wants the marginal costs to be low to provide an incentive. Clearly, the costs are not as low here as they are in the US.

Assuming that greater coverage and use are good, what should we do? I make one query of that assumption. I am enthusiast in all those matters—I suppose that enthusiast is a euphemism for an anorak—but internet content is also relevant. As a parent, I am aware that there is material on the internet that I do not want my children to see, just as there is material on the top shelf of the newsagent that I do not want them to see. However, rationing by price—getting people to come off the internet—has nothing to do with that problem. It is vital that the problem is addressed, but we are tackling it in a haphazard and ineffective way. I have reservations about teenagers in their bedrooms spending hours on the net unsupervised. However, the issues that we are raising in the debate are not inconsistent with tackling that problem.

What can be done? The Campaign for Unmetered Telecommunications, with which I am sure the Minister is familiar, has been energetic and effective in publicising the issue. It has an excellent website at www.unmetered.org, and I have spent many happy minutes surfing it and then getting off-line. It quotes the "father of the web", Tim Berners-Lee, who says:

"universal internet access for all in a country is very important. To be practical, internet connections must be permanent . . . The time taken to dial up over a telephone line makes many uses of the internet . . . prohibitively bothersome. Regulatory systems and charging which support the status quo in which the telephone system is used to dial every time the internet is used hobble a country's ability to use the network—it is a bit like asking a motor vehicle to be preceded by a man carrying a red flag. It is forcing the new technology to operate in the mode of the old technology."

That final observation is a telling one. We are not talking about more people having PCs with modems in the back, or more people hopping on and off-line. We are

talking about—to use the awful phrase—the web life style, in which the internet is integral to our activities, but as a servant, not a master.

America OnLine has just surveyed more than 11,000 of its customers, almost all of whom cited local call costs as the main barrier to greater internet use. I know that there is no such thing as a free lunch. We are talking not about free local calls, but about unmetered local calls coupled with some sort of subscription charge—that is, trying to get marginal costs down and so increasing use.

Some might say that that is happening anyway and that the market will produce that result because, if that is what customers want, suppliers will provide it. However, it strikes me as inherently unlikely that the commercial interests of BT in a regulated environment will coincide exactly with society's best interests. BT has a job to do: it exists to make profits within the constraints imposed on it. Why should its pricing policy be identical to that which society wants in order to maximise internet use among lower income households, students and so on? Such a coincidence is unlikely to occur.

The market has made some progress, but there is no guarantee that it will take us where we want to go. The hon. Member for South Dorset (Mr. Bruce) and others would say that we are getting there: for example, Screaming.Net—a phrase I have been dying to get into *Hansard*—set up a freefone access system, but there are strings attached in that the customer has to change phone company and go over to Localtel. Mysteriously, BT has been slow in getting people over to Localtel: it claims that it underestimated demand, but Localtel says that it forewarned BT of the demand and that BT has simply not coped. The idea that BT would enthusiastically commit resources to moving its customers to someone else's business is hard to swallow—it would not be surprising if it did the bare minimum.

Last weekend, without making a lot of fuss—the announcement was made on the internet, because the company did not want many people to know, which is telling—BT gave free 48-hour internet access to BT internet subscribers. The company did not publicise that service, because it was not sure that it could cope with large-scale use. Strangely enough, the service proved extremely popular, but, once again, there were strings attached: it was provided only at the weekend, customers were logged off after 20 minutes if they did not do anything, and they were restricted to a maximum of 12 hours on-line at a time.

Perhaps we are inching in the right direction, but I doubt that the cultural shift that is necessary will take place without active Government intervention. In short, we need a new approach to those issues. Tim Berners-Lee says:

> "Personally, having the luxury of a permanent . . . connection at home I notice the change of role a computer plays in the home—it becomes immeasurably more friendly. One is much more inclined to order things, pay bills, and check news and weather using it when one does not have to wait and bother with dialling into a service provider."

It seems to me that British skills and temperament are well suited to taking advantage of these great technological advances and to taking a world lead in using the internet for business, education and leisure. We have a great opportunity, but we are behind in the game, and the reasons for that can be found in the regulatory structure. I hope the Minister will assure us that he is urging the Office of Telecommunications, Oftel, to encourage, not incremental change, but a cultural shift in the way in which we perceive the internet, which will be to the benefit of all our citizens.

1.14 pm

The Minister for Small Firms, Trade and Industry (Mr. Michael Wills): I thank the hon. Member for Northavon (Mr. Webb) for raising such a vital issue and congratulate him on securing the debate. I share his enthusiasm for the liberating and empowering potential of the internet for every individual and every business, large and small. He is right to identify that potential and the Government wholly agree with him.

I agree that we are in a transitional period. The technology is remarkably new—in fact it is remarkable in every way. If I may be a little extravagant at this point, never before in human history has a technology with such a profoundly transforming potential become available to so many people so rapidly. Inevitably, all sorts of questions arise about how we as a society cope with such an incredible new technology and, during this transitional period, we have to consider carefully every aspect of our actions in that respect.

I also agree that the widespread availability of a speedy access infrastructure and a high-quality backbone telecommunications network that is available at an affordable price are vital to the growth of the internet. Ultimately, those things will be best provided through effective competition in both telecommunications infrastructure and in the services provided through it.

That competition is already at work in the UK to give us the networks that we need in order to lead the world in this field early in the next century. However, I agree with the hon. Gentleman that effective competition depends on effective and appropriate regulation. We have one of the most liberalised telecommunications markets in the world. As a result of competition, the cost of calls is steadily decreasing, and that is to the benefit of all internet users. I shall run through the range of competition in this country, which is remarkable for the rate at which it has increased over the past few years.

In fixed-line telecommunications, 45 domestic public telecommunications operators are now licensed, an increase of nearly one third since May 1997, when there were 33. They provide their own infrastructure and services in competition with the former monopolist, BT. Three major cable television companies offer telecommunications services over their lines. In March 1997, there were 125 active cable franchises passing 8.2 million homes, with 2.3 million homes connected. By January this year, the number of active cable franchises had increased to 134, with 11.5 million homes—more than half of all the homes in the UK—passed by cable and approximately 3.5 million connected. Those figures show an increase of more than 50 per cent. in less than two years.

More than 14.5 million people subscribe to the four mobile phone networks—a figure that has more than doubled since March 1997, when only 7.1 million people subscribed. The mobile phone market is now worth approximately £3.5 billion, or roughly one third of the fixed-line market. New pricing packages mean that the mobile phone market is increasingly competitive with fixed-line services. More than 100 companies are licensed

[Mr. Michael Wills]

to provide international facilities. The DTI has licensed 73 new operators of international services since the general election, and BT's share of the international market is now less than 52 per cent.

As a result of all that competition, call prices have fallen by more than 50 per cent. in real terms since 1984, and there have been even more dramatic price cuts for international calls. However, competition is still increasing: the roll-out of cable and other fixed-line telecommunications is progressing steadily and, later this year, we are to auction off the third generation of mobile telephone licences, which will dramatically increase competition in that sector. As the hon. Gentleman will be aware, that third generation will enable the provision of internet access through mobile phones.

We have an effective competitive framework for telecommunications in this country, but the hon. Gentleman was right to remind us that we must not be complacent. The Government are not complacent and are working to ensure that the regulatory framework develops in a way that continues to encourage competition and the provision of new services available to everybody.

A range of EC directives has reduced regulatory burdens and promoted competition across the EU. We continue to work with other member states on the 1999 review of the telecommunications regulatory framework in the EU to ensure that that process continues. Within the UK, the Government are reforming telecommunications regulation to ensure that it continues to promote competition effectively. For example, we are streamlining the process for modifying licences and we are consulting on a new appeals mechanism. In the longer term, as the hon. Member for Northavon mentioned, the Government are considering more fundamental reform to move away from the current prohibition-based licensing regime to a more flexible system. We shall publish further ideas on that in the follow-up to the convergence Green Paper later this month.

I receive much correspondence about the specific question of internet access. At present, most consumers access the internet through dial-up services—so-called narrowband access. That can be slow and cumbersome and, as the hon. Member for Northavon graphically described, is not necessarily the best way to access the internet. A key current issue is the provision of broadband access in the local loop. The question is how can we provide faster internet access and the ability to transfer much more data at high speeds, because that is the key to the effective roll-out of the technology.

Many new technologies are coming on stream to help to give consumers access to broadband services in the home. The hon. Member for Northavon mentioned digital subscriber line—or DSL—technology. Cable, satellite and terrestrial digital television services incorporating new interactive services will become available later this year. Cable modems, in particular, offer the prospect of much faster internet access without the need to dial up every time the user wants to go on to the net. As I have mentioned, third-generation mobiles will be another key innovation. We hope shortly to launch a consultation on making new spectrum available for fixed radio broadband access services.

Mr. Webb: The Minister mentioned cable modems. The chap who e-mailed me was concerned that those have been available elsewhere for a couple of years. He approached BT and it said that it was getting round to it. Is the Minister worried that leaving it to competition is not making the advances in technology available quickly enough?

Mr. Wills: I shall address the impact of the current competitive situation in a moment, but we believe that competition is the best way and is working. I do not want to sound complacent, but all the lessons of recent history tell us that competition is the most effective way to roll out the technology, although that does not mean that there is no place for regulation.

OFTEL has just finished consultation on access to bandwidth which aimed to determine whether there were barriers to the commercial provision of high bandwidth services to residential and small business users, especially services using that approach. It also considered whether OFTEL needed to intervene to allow competing network operators to offer such services directly to customers, by renting BT's copper wires—the so-called local loop unbundling.

The outcome of that consultation will have a significant impact on the UK telecoms market and in particular on achieving our goal of affordable high-speed internet access to consumers. We are in close touch with OFTEL and I understand that it expects to publish its conclusions later this month. I hope that the hon. Member for Northavon will forgive me, but I cannot pre-empt that process. However, I can assure him that the issue is at the forefront of our minds.

The hon. Gentleman asked what effect competition is having and he gave us some figures. He is aware of the Government's intention to make this country the best place to do business electronically by 2002. We are making progress. More than 1 million people in the UK became internet users for the first time during the third quarter of 1998. Worldwide, the speed of take-up is unprecedented. We should not only compare the position in the past in this country, but examine what our competitors are doing.

Some 16 per cent. of our population had internet access by 1998 compared to 28 per cent. in the US. We are behind the US and we have to catch up, but the comparison with other competitors is better. We have higher figures than Japan at 11 per cent. and much of Europe—only 9 per cent. of the population of Germany have internet access and only 5 per cent. in France. Those comparisons were made before the recent developments in internet pricing, such as Freeserve, and we expect those figures to increase considerably. However, our competitors are also increasing access and we cannot be complacent. Our recent benchmarking survey showed that more than 60 per cent. of UK business now has internet access. More than 50 per cent. has a website. Website use has almost doubled and e-commerce has trebled since 1997. We have seen faster growth in that area than either Japan or the US. We had 30 per cent. growth in internet penetration among British business, and 40 per cent. growth in website penetration since 1998. That compares to 6 and 11 per cent. growth in Japan and 20 and 30 per cent. growth in the US. I accept that the US is starting from a higher base, but we have made considerable advances that show that competition is working.

The ambitious target that we set for 1 million small and medium-sized companies to be hooked up to a network by 2002 will probably be achieved by 2000. The technologies are rolling out quickly and, as I have said, that shows that competition is working.

I know that the issue of the cost of access is of great concern to the hon. Member for Northavon and many other people. Is the cost affecting the take-up of the technology? The short answer is no. Of course cost is a consideration, but there is no evidence to suggest that it is a significant barrier to take-up, especially for businesses. As the hon. Gentleman acknowledged, we are just below the OECD average costs for internet access for peak times and, at off-peak times, we are cheaper than the US. The hon. Gentleman, as a distinguished economist, will understand that there is no such thing as a free service: it must be paid for at some point in the process. The question is whether the packages are put together in a way that encourages as many people and businesses as possible to take them up.

I would not like the hon. Member for Northavon to be deluded about the possibility of free access, but companies are free to offer whatever innovative tariffing packages they wish. We have seen a great explosion of such packages in recent months. For example, Kingston Communications in Hull recently introduced a package of £12.77 per month plus 5.5p per call, no matter how long. Cable and Wireless Communications offer combined internet access and telephone charges from £5.99 per month. That includes the internet service provider subscription and up to 12 hours free online each month. NTL has launched a service providing high bandwidth internet connections for a flat rate of £40 a month. It is likely that such services will be rolled out more widely in the coming months. In addition, some internet service providers are now offering internet access on freefone numbers such as 0800 at off-peak times or weekends. The Government welcome such innovation in pricing packages which are delivering for consumers.

The hon. Member for Northavon is right to say that the market will not necessarily provide in all areas and the Government will have to step in. We are doing so to ensure that every school in the country is hooked up to the internet by 2002. We have made remarkable progress. In April 1998, only 20 per cent. of schools were hooked up and only 10 per cent. of those were connected through an integrated services data network link. In April 1999, just a year later, 40 per cent. of all schools were connected, including 30 per cent. via an ISDN. Our target, which we are confident of meeting, is 100 per cent. of schools connected by 2002, including 90 per cent. through an ISDN link. We must also ensure that we do not create a society of the information rich and the information poor. We have a program and a raft of initiatives—

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Mr. Michael Lord): Order. We must now turn to the next debate.

Surface Water Charges

1.30 pm

Jacqui Smith (Redditch): I am glad to have this opportunity to raise an issue that is causing significant financial problems for community and public bodies in my constituency, throughout the county of Worcestershire and I suspect the entire area covered by Severn Trent Water. I draw the Minister's attention particularly to the effects of the change in charging for surface water drainage for non-domestic customers that has been implemented by that company. I ask the Minister to ensure that the Director General of Water Services considers this change and its disproportionate and damaging effects in detail.

The duties of the regulator, as laid down in the Water Industries Act 1991, state that the director general

"has a duty to customers to ensure that no undue preference is shown and that there is no undue discrimination in the way companies fix and recover charges, and that rural customers are protected".

My argument is that Severn Trent Water's surface water drainage charging policy does, and will, discriminate against non-domestic customers who are least able to pay and that it will also disadvantage rural non-domestic customers.

Surface water drainage is part of the sewerage service offered by water companies and, until 1990, Severn Trent Water charged all its customers on the basis of rateable value. Since then, new customers and those with substantially altered properties have been charged on the basis of surface area. The company is now in the midst of a three-year plan to convert all existing customers from the rateable value basis for calculating charges to a system based on the total site area that the properties occupy. That transfer of the vast majority of non-domestic properties is causing the difficulties that I shall address. It is also important to note that my research and contacts with other water companies suggest that no other water company has chosen to make that change.

As the director general points out in his "Report on Tariff Structures and Charges 1999-2000", companies currently charge for surface drainage in a variety of ways. For example, they charge as part of foul sewerage charges through the volumetric tariff, as a flat fee within the fixed charge or through a combination of both, by reference to the rateable value of the property, or via a charge related to the surface area that drains to the public sewer. Severn Trent Water appears to be the only company that has chosen the last option.

I accept that there appears to be a certain logic in charging for drainage on the basis of the size of the area drained. However, as I will demonstrate, the results of that change in practice have been far from fair or logical. The director general may have foreseen some of those difficulties in his 1991 report on water payments when he said that, although surface and highway drainage raised a number of charging issues, recovering the costs associated with those services by reference to the volume of water delivered to customers—that is, instead of the surface area—might be simpler than, and just as good as, other approaches. When I look in detail at the effects of Severn Trent Water's decision, I believe increasingly that the director general was right.

I want to consider in detail the implications of those changes on two types of customer: first, village halls and community centres; and, secondly, schools within

[Jacqui Smith]

Worcestershire. I was first alerted to this issue about a year ago when a village hall in Feckenham in my constituency contacted me. Prior to September 1997, it had paid water bills on the basis of its rateable value. In September 1997, a meter was fitted and it therefore moved to the new site area method of calculating surface water drainage. The effect of the change was a 310 per cent. increase in the charge for sewerage services. The new sewerage charge would have been more than the total water and sewerage bill before the change and the surface water drainage element was by far the largest component of the bill. We should remember that the charge was levied for the service of draining rain water from a property. Can that really be the most costly part of the provision of water and sewerage services?

An administrative difficulty associated with the change became evident at this point. After the village hall appealed to Severn Trent Water, the company surveyed the site properly and agreed that some parts did not drain into its sewers and could therefore be removed from the site area calculation. To the company's credit, it has clearly been willing to put right the many mistakes made in calculating the surface area. However, those mistakes occurred originally because the work of estimating the surface area was put out to contractors who referred simply to ordnance survey maps and made no attempt to determine whether any parts of the total surface area, such as playing fields or lawns, did not drain to the areas served by Severn Trent Water. Furthermore, although the site area taken into consideration was reduced, the Feckenham village hall was left with a 165 per cent. increase in its sewerage charge.

Severn Trent Water and Ofwat have made much of the company's willingness to consider an abatement when part of a site does not drain into the company's sewer. However, for the vast majority of the community and public services affected, that will be just a drop in the ocean—or should I say the sewer—compared with the significant effect of the shift from rateable value to surface area charging.

Following my intervention and pressure from the village hall committee, the Feckenham village hall received a stay of execution as Severn Trent Water agreed that the basis of its surface water charging could revert to rateable value. However, without a change in policy, the village hall volunteers will have to meet the increase next Ap[illegible] Hereford and Worcester community council and [illegible]n with Communities in Rural England—ACRE—have also highlighted the difficulties caused by the company's policy, providing examples of one Worcestershire village community centre that is facing an £800 increase in its water bill and another village hall that will see its bill increase from £550 to £2,000 per year.

Following publicity about the issue, I was contacted by Worcestershire county council which expressed its concern about the effect of the change in water charges on its public buildings, particularly schools. Due to the administrative difficulties and complications inherent in the new system and disputes about the surface areas that should be included in the calculations, Worcestershire county council only recently received detailed information from Severn Trent Water about the effects of the charging changes. The overall effect of this change alone will increase water bills in the county by nearly £200,000. One school in Inkberrow in my constituency faces a yearly increase of £2,560—or 1,106 per cent.—in its water bill. Another school faces an increase of 779 per cent. and one of the smallest first schools in the town faces an increase of £787—or 449 per cent.—in its water bill.

Mr. David Lock (Wyre Forest): I am grateful to my hon. Friend for giving way. As a fellow Worcestershire Member of Parliament, I assure the House that this problem affects the whole county. Does my hon. Friend agree that the Government did not allocate extra money to health and education in order to top up Severn Trent Water's dividend? Does she agree also that this problem affects not only schools and community associations but commercial premises? A chain manufacturer in my constituency faced a 250 per cent. increase in his water bill. After we argued the case with the water company, the increase was reduced to 6 per cent. Throughout the Severn Trent Water area, businesses face rising water bills, and the jobs of our constituents are under threat merely so that that company's already massive profits can increase.

Jacqui Smith: My hon. Friend makes a good point, and I know that he has been active in raising the issue.

My particular concern is schools. In my constituency, water bills for schools will increase by a total of £24,000 next April. As my hon. Friend pointed out, that money must come from tight education budgets when, as we all agree, it should be spent in the classroom to improve standards.

When I wrote to Severn Trent Water and the Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions last year about my concerns, both pointed out that any change to charges will result in winners and losers. I agree, but in this case we must consider who will be the losers and the disproportionate extent to which they will lose.

Mr. Richard Burden (Birmingham, Northfield): Like my hon. Friend, I have raised this issue with Severn Trent Water and Ofwat and received the same reply about winners and losers. The problem does not relate to rural areas alone, although my hon. Friend rightly stressed their importance, but to urban areas, commercial premises, schools and public buildings. Surely we need more research to find out who are the losers and whether some are subject to undue discrimination. I asked Ofwat and Severn Trent Water what research they did before embarking on the policy, and I await the response with interest.

Jacqui Smith: My hon. Friend makes a powerful point, and I shall refer to that later in my speech. I am grateful that hon. Members on both sides of the House have raised the problems caused by the charges set by Severn Trent Water.

The company has argued that the change will be revenue neutral, but if that is the case, some of its non-domestic customers must think that Christmas has come early. Of course, anyone who substantially gained from the change would be unlikely to contact their Member of Parliament to complain, but given Severn Trent Water's assertion and the village halls and schools

that are facing the significant losses that I have outlined, it is, as my hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham, Northfield (Mr. Burden) said, incumbent on the company to provide evidence to the director general about the customers who will gain from the change and the extent to which they will benefit.

To return to my point about the nature of the losers, I am concerned that the losses appear to be hitting community and public facilities. The effect of the change is regressive in that it hits services that have little ability to find money to pay the increased charges. The determining factor for the organisations that have been hit badly by the change is the relationship between the rateable value of their property and the surface area that it occupies. In other words, the losers are the non-domestic customers whose property has a low rateable value but a high surface area. Those properties tend to be public buildings and they are predominantly in rural areas.

It is not only the nature of the losers that causes concern but the extent of their losses. Increases of hundreds of per cent. in sewerage charges are not isolated occurrences. It is not reasonable for any customer of a utility to face such enormous increases. Those increases are particularly unreasonable when they will also have social costs. Furthermore, the distorting effect of the change is demonstrated by the large proportion of the overall bill that surface water charges now constitute for many non-domestic customers. That cannot be a true reflection of the costs involved, which the director general set as a priority for charging schemes.

Having outlined the difficulties being caused by the change to surface water charging by Severn Trent Water, I ask my hon. Friend the Minister to undertake to instruct the water regulator—the Director General of Water Services—to consider in detail the effects of the change, with particular reference, as I have already said, to where the losses occur, the disproportionate nature of the increases and the extent to which the new system fulfils his demand that charges should more clearly reflect the costs of delivering the service.

I am encouraged that my hon. Friend will be able to do that following the extension of the director general's powers to approve charging schemes introduced in the Water Industry Bill. I am further encouraged by a letter sent to ACRE in February in which my right hon. Friend the Minister for the Environment stated:

"Water companies will have the prime responsibility for considering and proposing their charges schemes. However, these will be subject to approval by OFWAT, and Ministers will have powers to ensure that particular issues are addressed in charges schemes".

Later in the letter, he stated:

"where charges for sewerage are covered by companies' charges schemes—including, for instance, surface water drainage—it will be for the Director General, under the provisions of the Bill, to consider whether to approve such charges schemes."

The director general should outline in his consideration whether Severn Trent Water should allow non-domestic customers to opt for their surface water charges to continue to be based on rateable values. That would be appropriate given the repeal of section 145 of the Water Industry Act 1991 in the Water Industry Bill. In its literature, Severn Trent Water has used the need to comply with section 145 as the justification for the change. Now that the need has been removed, it should offer customers the option to stay with rateable values for surface water charging.

The social costs caused to non-commercial and non-profit-making organisations by those large increases in water charges highlight the demand of organisations such as ACRE that a third tier of water charging should exist for such customers, who fall between commercial and household customers. Severn Trent Water has recognised that there is a distinction to be made because it was willing to defer the introduction of the higher charges for customers and properties that it defined as "sensitive". Those included registered charities and any other non-commercial or non-profit-making organisation. That sensitivity will not disappear next April when Severn Trent Water intends to impose the increased charges. I hope that my hon. Friend the Minister agrees that the company should recognise the particular position of those community and public bodies and find a third way to deal with their water charges.

In conclusion, this change to surface water charging will impose significant social costs; it will hit those who are least able to pay; it is administratively difficult for all involved; and it will drain resources from vital public services such as education. I hope that my hon. Friend will join me and other hon. Friends in resisting the change and seeking a fairer solution.

1.48 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions (Ms Glenda Jackson): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Redditch (Jacqui Smith) on securing this debate and for setting out clearly why surface water drainage charges are a major local concern. I thank her for her generosity in affording time to my hon. Friends the Members for Wyre Forest (Mr. Lock) and for Birmingham, Northfield (Mr. Burden) to express the concerns of their constituents which should be brought to the attention of the House.

Water is an essential service, vital for life and health. The Government believe that a charging system must reflect that fact, ensuring that customers are not deprived of water for drinking, washing, cooking and sanitation. The principles behind our policy are to provide a system of charges that are fair and affordable, particularly for vulnerable customers, to protect public health, to ensure that water supplies are used in a sustainable way and to protect the aquatic environment. We believe that consumer choice should lie at the heart of the new system.

Our consultation document, "Water Charging in England and Wales—A New Approach", set out a number of proposals that we believe offer customers greater fairness and choice. We are now taking our proposals forward through the Water Industry Bill.

It cannot be right for anyone to be deprived of essential water because they cannot afford to pay their water bill. The loss of water supply can have a severe effect not only on the individual consumer but on wider public health concerns. The Water Industry Bill therefore prohibits household disconnection, and ensures that premises providing key services to the community cannot be deprived of their water supply because of non-payment. That provision extends to institutions such as schools, hospitals and nursing homes and children's homes.

We also recognise that some customers—those with high essential use of water—could suffer severe hardship if required to pay on the basis of a measured bill. We propose to ensure that targeted and effective protection

[Ms Glenda Jackson]

is available for vulnerable households. Those entitled to protection should be large families on low incomes and those with medical conditions requiring a high use of water, although we would be happy to consider targeted proposals to protect other groups if a case could be made that they would suffer severe hardship.

We wish to extend customer choice in water charging as far as is practicable. Household customers should have a right to remain on an unmeasured charge when they are using water for essential purposes only. In ruling out universal compulsory metering, we have accepted that meters may suit the circumstances of some customers with low water use. Therefore, household customers should be able to opt for a meter, to be installed free, with the protection that those who do so may revert to an unmeasured charge within one year. In addition, the Bill will remove the deadline for use of rateable values in calculating charges. That fulfils our commitment to continue permitting water companies to use rateable value for charging, avoiding the need for significant upheavals in charging arrangements.

As my hon. Friend the Member for Redditch said, the Director General of Water Services is responsible for economic regulation by controlling companies' overall price limits, ensuring that changes to charges, such as those that my hon. Friend has mentioned, cannot be used as a device to boost company income and profits. The director general also has a responsibility to ensure that charges do not reflect undue preference for, or unduly discriminate against, any class or group of customers. However, the director general does not currently have more specific powers over the individual elements of companies' charges.

The Water Industry Bill will give the director general new powers to approve water companies' charging schemes, and will enable Ministers to give the director general guidance on the exercise of those powers. That represents an important new assurance for customers, and will put greater pressure on companies to consider carefully and thoroughly the impact of their proposals. It is essential that water companies create charging arrangements that are responsive to their customers' concerns and reflect local needs.

Severn Trent Water—as my hon. Friend the Member for Redditch said—charges households for surface and highway drainage by reference to the rateable value of the property. Properties without a rateable value pay a charge related to property type. Severn Trent Water—again as my hon. Friend stated—has embarked on a programme of charging non-household customers on a site area basis. Its intention is that all non-household customers will be charged on that basis by March 2000.

Anglian Water, Welsh Water and South West Water charge for surface and highway drainage through volumetric charge. North West Water, Northumbrian Water, Southern Water, Thames Water and Wessex Water include surface and highway drainage in their standing charges. Northumbrian Water is the only company other than Severn Trent Water that charges non-household properties by a method different from that applied to households. Those companies use a method that refers to rateable value rather than a site area based charging system.

The Government understand the concerns that have been expressed about Severn Trent Water's method of charging non-household properties for surface water drainage. Unfortunately, as my hon. Friend the Member for Redditch had occasion to say, any change to underlying charging methods will be likely to throw up winners and losers. Planning how to handle the consequence of change, including identifying likely losers and developing transitional arrangements as necessary, must be a key part of considering the case for change.

It appears that, under a change to charges based on surface area, premises with high rateable values but small sites will gain, but premises with low rateable values and large sites will lose. We understand that Severn Trent Water has agreed to delay the introduction of a site area based charge in some cases on the ground of merit. We also understand that, where properties have significant areas of grass, garden or car park without a drainage system that connects with the main drain, it has agreed to remove those areas from the measured assessment of those properties.

Anyone faced with large increases as a result of the change introduced by Severn Trent Water should contact the company with a view to establishing that the whole of their site indeed drains to the public sewerage system, and the possibility of phasing in the increase in charges. If they are not satisfied with the company's response, they may wish to take up the matter with Ofwat's central customer service committee. That committee has the duty to represent the views of water customers and to investigate their complaints.

Surface water drainage is not a service provided by sewerage undertakers to every customer. Many customers are not aware that they pay such a charge. Much surface water soaks into the ground where it falls, or flows into soakaways on the premises rather than public sewers. Even though in such cases some companies offer a voluntary rebate, rebates are not universal and the onus is on customers to seek them out.

Sewerage charges on customers' bills seldom identify separately the three elements of charge: foul water, surface water and highway drainage. Customers do not, therefore, have full information on the cost of each of those services. The Government believe customers should be aware of all elements of their bills and would expect water companies to ensure that they are separately identified.

The Director General of Water Services also wants more transparency in the way in which customers are billed. Companies which charge for surface and highway drainage through a fixed charge have been asked to show the amount separately on bills, and all companies have been asked to provide, at the very least, an explanation of their charges.

In principle, we consider that all customers who can demonstrate that they do not receive a specific sewerage service should be entitled to an appropriate abatement of charges. Therefore, when customers are only connected for foul drainage, charges levied by companies should not cover surface drainage. In such circumstances, the director general would like companies to provide abatements in charges. The Government support that approach, as we

recognise that surface water drainage for some users can make up a substantial element of the overall charge—a point most tellingly made by my hon. Friend the Member for Redditch.

Under the legislative framework that we inherited from the previous Government, water companies have considerable freedom in deciding how to levy charges on customers, including widespread powers to insist on compulsory metering, as well as the method of calculating surface water drainage charges.

Mr. Lock: When the Minister for the Environment contacts the Director General of Water Services on—quite rightly—the structure of abatements in charges for properties that have soakaways, will he ensure that the forms that companies issue to customers who want to apply for such abatements are simplified? I recently came across a case of Severn Trent Water requiring detailed plans—which the average householder simply could not produce—to prove that the customers qualified for an abatement to which they were clearly entitled.

Ms Jackson: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for making that point. It is debatable whether I have ever heard anything more ridiculous than Severn Trent Water's requirements of its customers in that regard, particularly as I would imagine that many of its customers are somewhat elderly and would have some difficulty in reading any form. Being required to discover plans and forward them is absurd.

We are taking action to deliver our manifesto commitment to pursue tough and effective regulation of the water industry in the interests of customers and the environment. The Water Industry Bill that is before Parliament will make the charges of water companies subject to tighter regulation. The Government plan to consult soon on the draft guidance that Ministers will give to the director general on the use of his new powers. I shall ensure that a copy is sent not only to my hon. Friend the Member for Redditch but to my hon. Friends the Members for Wyre Forest and for Northfield as part of the consultation process.

I am sure that the director general will have noted the issues debated today, and will bear them in mind when considering future charges in the Severn Trent Water area and, indeed, the rest of England and Wales. I have little doubt that, if the directors of Severn Trent Water do not notice this debate, they will have it drawn to their attention.

It being before Two o'clock, the motion for the Adjournment of the House lapsed, without Question put.

Sitting suspended, pursuant to Standing Order No. 10 (Wednesday sittings), till half-past Two o'clock.

Oral Answers to Questions

WALES

The Secretary of State was asked—

National Health Service

1. **Mr. Desmond Swayne** (New Forest, West): When he last met representatives of the National Health Service Confederation in Wales to discuss the funding of the national health service. [85155]

The Secretary of State for Wales (Mr. Alun Michael): I plan soon to meet representatives of the NHS Confederation in Wales. I have had meetings with representatives of all the NHS trusts and health authorities in Wales, to address the very real problems that we inherited from the previous Government.

Mr. Swayne: Audit Commission figures show that the NHS in Wales is running an in-year deficit of £9 million, as compared with a mere £700,000 deficit in 1996–97. In the coming year, there will be additional cost pressures, in the form of 5 per cent. medical inflation, £30 million in increased drugs bills and £5 million in medical negligence claims. The NHS Confederation has said that, this year, tough decisions will have to be taken. Will the Secretary of State tell us what those tough decisions will be?

Mr. Michael: The NHS Confederation is right that tough decisions will have to be taken, because of the state of chaos—the absolute disgrace—in which the NHS in Wales was left by the previous Government. In a briefing on the matter dealt with in the hon. Gentleman's question, the NHS Confederation welcomed the extra £193 million in funding for the health service in Wales, and noted the high level of contributions being made by the current Government.

The hon. Gentleman needs to understand both the state of chaos left by the previous Government, and the very positive action that the current Government are taking to deal with that chaos, which includes providing an extra £1 billion over the next three years for the NHS in Wales. Perhaps he would like to take a more informed interest in the health service in Wales.

Mr. Win Griffiths (Bridgend): In my right hon. Friend's preparations for the meeting with the NHS Confederation, what consideration has been given to specialist regional health services? I believe that some of those issues have to be re-examined.

Mr. Michael: My hon. Friend is right about that. An expert has been appointed to head up the commissioning of specialist services in Wales, to try to ensure that we direct the finances of the NHS in Wales to where they are most needed: to patient care and to dealing with our priorities, in both health care and health gain.

Mr. Cynog Dafis (Ceredigion): Does the Secretary of State agree with the NHS in Wales that there is a funding crisis of the utmost severity, and that only one of the consequences of the crisis is a block on the capital programme, which is affecting—among many others—the renal dialysis programme in Aberystwyth and the Porthmadog cottage hospital? Is it not time the Government really accepted that the NHS is underfunded, partly because of the Government's insistence on sticking with Tory spending plans for the first two years of their Administration? What will seriously be done about easing the situation and releasing trusts in Wales from the crippling debt burdens that they carry?

Mr. Michael: The real crisis is one of financial management at both the health authority and trust level. The hon. Gentleman's old area of Dyfed Powys is one that gives me particular concern, and he will know of the action that I am taking to try to deal with that concern. As for finance, I underline the fact that I have promised £1 billion extra for the NHS in Wales. I have announced new spending for this year of £240 million for the NHS in Wales, which will give health authorities £193 million more in their discretionary allocations. That is a 10.3 uplift, which is unprecedented.

The problem is that resources in the NHS in Wales are not reaching the places that they need to reach. I have made it quite clear that the new Assembly Secretary for Health and I will show leadership and work with everyone who is willing to co-operate in trying to clear up an undoubtedly unacceptable situation. However, expressing unjustified fears on matters such as specific closures will not help the situation. Nevertheless, we have to engage with the situation, which is very serious.

Mr. John Smith (Vale of Glamorgan): Does my right hon. Friend agree that the extra funds are not being used to provide orthopaedic beds at Llandough hospital, with which I know he is familiar? Constituents of mine are waiting ever longer for standard orthopaedic operations. Some elderly constituents are going through the cruel experience of being allocated a time for an operation only to have it cancelled at the last minute. The Government provided extra funds to meet emergency admissions to the hospital, but those admissions are now going to orthopaedic beds, so my constituents are waiting. Will he intervene before 1 July to try to do something about the problem?

Mr. Michael: The situation is unacceptable. An additional consultant is being appointed and additional beds are being made available. My hon. Friend has illustrated another aspect of the chaos in the NHS in Wales. I said in my statement in December and in my comments on NHS finances in 1 April that the situation was unacceptable. People should be able to depend on the services being there when they need them and on the NHS as a whole operating in a co-operative and positive way to provide those services. I accept his point about orthopaedic services; it is under review.

Dr. Liam Fox (Woodspring): One of the problems facing the health service in Wales and elsewhere is junior doctors' hours. Hon. Members on both sides will welcome the plans being put forward by the Welsh Assembly to reduce junior doctors' hours, but we are all appalled by the Government's plans to seek the freedom to increase the average number of hours that junior doctors are allowed to work.

Junior doctors' hours were substantially reduced under the Conservative Government. Does the Secretary of State believe that it is sensible or safe for junior doctors in Wales or elsewhere to work for 65 hours a week? Does he agree with the Secretary of State for Health, who wants an increase in junior doctors' hours, or with the Health Secretary of the Welsh Assembly, who plans to reduce those hours?

Mr. Michael: It does not help if the Conservatives repeat old inaccuracies. There is no difference between Government policy and what the Assembly Health Secretary has said. She corrected some of the old rumours and misapprehensions about what the Government are doing and what is being done by Europe. Her statement was accurate and was consistent with what my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Health has said. She gave the position as it is. It would be helpful if the hon. Gentleman studied what has been said and understood it.

Mr. Gareth Thomas (Clwyd, West): Does my right hon. Friend agree that the health service in Wales faces many challenges that Assembly Members need to address in a coolheaded and workmanlike manner? Does he share the sense of dismay that many people in Wales feel at the fact that Plaid Cymru and Conservative Members engaged in the childish tactic of walking out of the National Assembly for Wales yesterday? That tactic was condoned by the right hon. Member for Caernarfon (Mr. Wigley) and by the Conservatives.

Mr. Michael: My hon. Friend should not stir the right hon. Member for Caernarfon up, because he might disappear from this Chamber as well, and we would not want that. My hon. Friend is right to point out that the NHS in Wales faces major challenges. When the right hon. Member for Wokingham (Mr. Redwood) was Secretary of State for Wales he withdrew many of the checks and balances from the Welsh Office management of the NHS. We are paying the price for his mistakes. I hope that we shall have co-operation from all parties to re-establish the NHS as a dependable service that provides care when it is needed. As my hon. Friend suggests, that requires a positive and reasonable approach from everybody.

Small Businesses

2. **Mr. John Bercow** (Buckingham): If he will make a statement on the prospects for the small business sector in Wales. [85156]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Wales (Mr. Peter Hain): There is a revival of small business confidence in Wales, supported by many Welsh Office initiatives. Following the transfer of functions, the issue will be a matter for the National Assembly for Wales.

Mr. Bercow: I am afraid that that answer wins a gold medal only for complacency. In the first quarter of 1999 there were 444 business failures—an increase of more than 40 per cent. on the equivalent period last year—and 3,000 jobs were lost in manufacturing industry alone. Business optimism has fallen faster in Wales than in any other part of the United Kingdom. Does the hon. Gentleman not recognise the gravity of the situation? Since he took office, how many times has he bothered to meet his counterparts from the Department of Trade and Industry to discuss the crippling over-regulation of small businesses, which has been gathering pace and has been exacerbated throughout his tenure of office?

Mr. Hain: I have lost count of the number of times I have met my ministerial colleagues in the Department of Trade and Industry to discuss concerns from business in Wales and other matters. [HON. MEMBERS: "What have you achieved?"] Our achievement has been to take seriously the burden of red tape and over-regulation that was heaped upon the business community by the previous Government. As the Member representing Buckingham, the hon. Gentleman does not have a clue about what is going on in Wales. That is shown by the fact that the Welsh Federation of Small Businesses recently issued a statement expressing the small business sector's confidence in the future of the Welsh economy. That is because interest rates are at a 33-year record low, corporation tax for small businesses is at a record low of 10p, and tax for self-employed business men is also at a record low, starting at 10p. That is why the small business sector trusts Labour to look after its interests.

Ms Jackie Lawrence (Preseli Pembrokeshire): I wonder whether my hon. Friend has seen the business survey conducted by the Federation of Small Businesses in March 1999 which precisely countered what was said by the hon. Member for Buckingham (Mr. Bercow). It showed that 33 per cent. of small businesses in Wales are more optimistic than they were last year and that 20 per cent. have increased their work force. Does my hon. Friend agree that that is in part due to the increased consultation process that is now available to small businesses as a result of the Government of Wales Act 1998?

Mr. Hain: Yes, I agree with my hon. Friend. What is more, in the past two years during which I have been the Minister responsible for industry, the Welsh Office has had more of an open door to small businesses than ever before. There has been a series of initiatives, including an 18 per cent. increase this year in spending on small business support, which will help 6,000 companies. In addition, we are establishing an entrepreneurship action plan and making Wales an enterprising country in which people want to expand and invest. The small business sector is a vital part of that.

Mr. Elfyn Llwyd (Meirionnydd Nant Conwy): Bearing in mind the fact that over 90 per cent. of employment in Wales is in the small and medium-sized enterprise sector, what recent plans have there been to assist the small business sector to expand its work force, particularly to make it more economically viable and attractive to do so, and to bring in youngsters?

Mr. Hain: In addition to the measures that I have already described, we have revamped Business Connect Wales, giving it a new business-led management board, to ensure that it is able to supply the support and advice often needed by small business people. The sole trader initiative, by which a self-employed individual is able to take on his or her first worker, has been a great success

in Wales, particularly north Wales, and is being driven forward. A series of other measures is being put in place to give small businesses what the hon. Gentleman correctly says is their rightful place in the Welsh economy.

Mr. Huw Edwards (Monmouth): Has my hon. Friend seen the list of the fastest growing firms in Wales which was published by the *Western Mail* this morning in conjunction with KPMG? May I share my wonderment and pleasure at the fact that six of those happen to be in Monmouthshire? Does my hon. Friend agree that the last thing needed by small firms exporting in Wales is the anti-European posturing of the Conservative party?

Mr. Hain: I very much agree with my hon. Friend and I am sure that the wonderful success of those companies in Monmouth is due to the excellent representation from their Member of Parliament. Every small business in Wales has a great deal to fear from the Tory objective, expressed in the past few days, of wanting to leave Europe instead of wanting to lead Europe.

Mr. Nigel Evans (Ribble Valley): I see that the Minister is wearing his rose-tinted spectacles. Does he accept that in the first three months of this year the number of bankruptcies among Welsh businesses rose by 40 per cent. and is rising at three times that rate among smaller companies? Smaller companies are creating jobs, but the Government are putting them in a straitjacket as a result of costly extra domestic legislation and the fact that they will sign up to any directive from Brussels. Is it not the case that our Welsh businesses want to be in Europe, but do not want to be ruled and governed by Europe?

Mr. Hain: Welsh businesses want a Government who stand up for them, support them and represent them strongly in Europe instead of standing on the fringes pursuing extremist policies that would result in Britain leaving Europe, as it would do under a Conservative Government. In respect of small business problems, it really takes the biscuit to recall that the hon. Gentleman speaks for a party that presided over record bankruptcies among small businesses in Wales and right across Britain. In each of the last five years of Conservative Government there was an increase in the number of closures and VAT deregistrations among small businesses in Wales. It is a shabby record that we are reversing.

Beef on the Bone

3. **Mr. Andrew Robathan** (Blaby): What representations he has received regarding the ban on the sale of beef on the bone. [85157]

The Secretary of State for Wales (Mr. Alun Michael): I have received many representations, both supporting and opposing the ban of the sale of beef on the bone. In Wales, following the transfer of functions, it will become a matter for the National Assembly.

Mr. Robathan: I understand that after 1 July the National Assembly may decide to lift the ban on beef on the bone in Wales. That will lead to the astonishing predicament whereby one will be able to eat beef on the bone in Monmouth, but not if one travels up the A40 to Ross-on-Wye. What does the Secretary of State think about that ludicrous situation? What is his position as regards Cabinet collective responsibility? Does he take the Government's absurd line that we are not allowed to eat beef on the bone, or will he support the sensible decision made by the representatives of the Welsh people?

Mr. Michael: The hon. Gentleman's question is based on the astonishing assumption that the Welsh Assembly will deal with the issue unreasonably, without examining the evidence. The Assembly Committees responsible for agriculture and health are spending time looking at the evidence in order to reach a sensible decision—the best decision in the interests of the people of Wales. I have every confidence in their ability to look objectively at the facts.

It is the essence of devolution that some decisions will be taken in Wales for Wales and others will be taken elsewhere. However, the hon. Gentleman is not right to assume that people will act irrationally. That is not the way in which the Welsh Assembly is behaving.

Dr. Liam Fox (Woodspring): That was hardly an answer. The House deserves an answer to the following question: does the Secretary of State believe that it would be right for an hon. Member who is also a Member of the Welsh Assembly to vote in this House to retain a ban on beef on the bone, but to vote elsewhere to lift it? When the Secretary of State for Scotland said that people who vote in different ways in two different areas will have to resolve that problem themselves, perhaps he had the Secretary of State for Wales in mind.

Mr. Michael: The devolution settlement is different in Scotland and Wales and we are answering on Welsh issues in our own way. I am happy to answer real questions, not the artificial nonsense questions that the hon. Gentleman dreams up. Of course, some responsibilities will in future fall to the Welsh Assembly. Others fall to the House and to right hon. and hon. Members, including those representing Welsh constituencies. The hon. Gentleman needs to understand the devolution settlement.

Anti-drugs Strategy

4. **Mrs. Ann Winterton** (Congleton): When he last met the United Kingdom anti-drugs co-ordinator to discuss the implementation of Her Majesty's Government's anti-drugs strategy in Wales. [85158]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Wales (Mr. Jon Owen Jones): My right hon. Friend and I met the UK anti-drugs co-ordinator on 4 February 1999 to discuss plans for tackling substance misuse in Wales. From 1 July, this will be a matter for the National Assembly for Wales.

Mrs. Winterton: Following the recent publication of the United Kingdom anti-drugs co-ordinator's first annual report and national plan, and bearing it in mind that the Minister for the Cabinet Office has conceded that Britain's drug abuse problem may grow worse before Government initiatives can have any significant impact, what specific plans does the Minister have to combat the rising tide of heroin abuse and drug-related crime in Wales?

Mr. Jones: I welcome the hon. Lady's concern, and I know that she has expressed anxieties on this subject for

a number of years. In Wales, we have a strategy called "Forward Together" which seeks to implement key elements of the UK strategy in a way that is applicable to Wales. We have a social inclusion fund amounting to £48 million over the next three years, £4.5 million of which is earmarked to help with drug and alcohol action teams and with support for drug and alcohol problems, which are unfortunately as severe in Wales as they are throughout the United Kingdom.

Council of Ministers

5. **Mr. Dafydd Wigley** (Caernarfon): What arrangements are proposed for the representation of Wales in the EU Council of Ministers in the draft concordat drawn up by the Foreign Office and the Welsh Office. [85159]

The Secretary of State for Wales (Mr. Alun Michael): Such European matters will be covered in an overarching concordat between the UK Government and the devolved bodies.

Mr. Eric Forth (Bromley and Chislehurst): A what?

Mr. Michael: It would be as well for the right hon. Gentleman to wait until I have finished my answer before he gets too excited.

Assembly Secretaries will be able to form part of the UK delegation to the Council of Ministers, to speak to the agreed UK line where appropriate and to raise Welsh issues. There will be close co-operation between the Assembly Secretaries and Ministers in the UK Government.

Mr. Wigley: Will the Secretary of State give an assurance that Secretaries of State from his Government who are members of UK delegations in the Council of Ministers will be able to speak up in the interests of Wales and will not have their opinions suppressed, as has happened in the case of the report by John Humphries on the impact of the European Union on Wales? It has been suppressed by the Kinnock Cabinet in Brussels because it highlights the need for the Government in London to provide matching funding to take advantage of objective 1 moneys for Wales.

Mr. Michael: I will answer gently in case the right hon. Gentleman gets overexcited and feels he has to rush from the Chamber again. Indeed, he is getting overexcited on this point. I have seen the reports, but I have no idea as to the decision-making process. The relationship between Assembly Secretaries and Ministers at Westminster will be one of partnership. The representatives of Wales will participate—as junior Ministers and I have done in the past—in agreeing the United Kingdom line to be fought for at European meetings, and will be part of the delegations. Where appropriate, they will be able to put the case for Wales. This is a question of partnership—which is what devolution is all about.

Mr. Ian Bruce (South Dorset): Does the concordat contain details of the regional assistance that is to come from Europe this year? Is not it strange that the Labour party claimed yesterday that it had got the best deal ever, but that it has refused to announce what that deal is until the election is over?

Mr. Michael: It depends on what the hon. Gentleman is asking about. His question is muddled. We have received the best deal ever for Wales, because the Prime Minister and the Chancellor—working with Welsh Labour MEPs—were successful in winning objective 1 status for large parts of Wales. It is an extremely good settlement. There are other issues in terms of structural funds that have yet to be finalised, and those will be discussed within the Government, and between the Government and our colleagues in Europe.

Democratic Systems

6. **Mr. Paul Flynn** (Newport, West): What measures he intends to promote to improve democratic systems in Wales. [85160]

The Secretary of State for Wales (Mr. Alun Michael): The establishment of the National Assembly for Wales has brought democracy closer to the people of Wales. Our modernisation agenda involves increasing local accountability; encouraging councils to give local people a greater say in how councils are run; reviewing electoral procedures to encourage greater participation in voting; and seeking to enable councils to experiment with the way in which local authorities are conducted. Our specific proposals for local government are set out in the White Paper, "Local Voices: Modernising Local Government in Wales", which was published in July 1998.

Mr. Flynn: Does my right hon. Friend agree that commercial lobbying is the mother of corruption and the enemy of open democracy? What will he do to guarantee that the infestation of Cardiff by commercial lobbyists in the past few months will not succeed in gaining them any influence whatever on Welsh Office decisions or on the policies of the Welsh Assembly?

Mr. Michael: I am not sure about the infestation to which my hon. Friend refers, but I have certainly seen a lot of organisations taking a great deal of interest in Cardiff because they view the arrival of the Assembly as something positive for business as well as for the whole of Wales. The greatest protection is the fact that, built into the design of the National Assembly for Wales, and supported by the House, are the three partnerships: with local government, with the voluntary sector and—relevant to my hon. Friend's question—with business. To have open contact with business at every level is the best way of ensuring that we have good governance and protection against any inappropriate approaches to Assembly members or to the Assembly as a whole.

Mr. Richard Livsey (Brecon and Radnorshire): In the interests of improving democracy in Wales, and given the scams that have occurred in local government in both north and south Wales, when will the Secretary of State introduce proportional representation for local government elections in Wales?

Mr. Michael: The hon. Gentleman has an inventive way of getting a traditional old Liberal song into this debate. I have no such plans at present.

Mr. Ted Rowlands (Merthyr Tydfil and Rhymney): When does my right hon. Friend intend to light the bonfire

of the quangos? Was it not our position in devolution debates that we would abolish many of the quangos, which were the plague of the previous Administration?

Mr. Michael: I am sorry that my hon. Friend has not noticed the steps that have already been taken, including the ending of Tai Cymru and the reduction of the number of NHS trusts. Those steps have made considerable progress in reducing the dependence on quangos that developed under the previous Government. Now that the Assembly is in place, many other decisions are being taken in an open and democratic way, and that will increase as the Committees of the Assembly take up their duties. The position of some of the remaining bodies will be reviewed. For instance, the Cardiff Bay development corporation will wind up in the coming year.

Mr. Nicholas Winterton (Macclesfield): If the Secretary of State improves the democratic system in Wales, will that lead to a reduction of junior Ministers in the House?

Mr. Michael: That is a matter for the Prime Minister.

Devolution Timetable

7. **Sir Sydney Chapman** (Chipping Barnet): When he next plans to meet the Committee Secretaries of the National Assembly for Wales to discuss the timetable for devolution of powers to the Assembly. [85161]

The Secretary of State for Wales (Mr. Alun Michael): I welcome the hon. Gentleman's belated arrival in the devolution debate. His question should clearly be treated as a sort of maiden speech.

Under the Transfer of Functions Order debated and agreed in the House on 24 February and in the other place on 3 March and made by Her Majesty in Council on 10 March 1999, the functions of the Secretary of State for Wales transfer to the Assembly on 1 July. By Committee Secretaries, I assume that the hon. Gentleman means the Assembly Secretaries, who are effectively the Ministers who make up the Assembly Cabinet. I meet them very frequently. There is no need to debate the date of the transfer of functions as the House has already decided it.

Sir Sydney Chapman: The Secretary of State is sadly but characteristically misinformed, as I have already taken part in the debates on devolution. Will he confirm that it is his intention to resign as Secretary of State? Surely it is incompatible to be both First Secretary and Secretary of State.

Taking education as an example of one of the devolved subjects, if the Assembly takes a decision to spend more money in a particular area of education, will that have to come out of another part of the Welsh Budget, or will the Secretary of State or his successor lobby the Cabinet to change its decision and give more money to Wales?

Mr. Michael: I said that the hon. Gentleman's first question was rather like a maiden speech. The second is equally ill informed. As I have said for many months, I will stand down as Secretary of State for Wales at the appropriate time, when I have assisted in the transition between the responsibilities that I currently hold and the establishment of the right relationships between the Assembly and colleagues in the United Kingdom Cabinet.

Beef and Dairy Farming

8. **Mr. Michael Fabricant** (Lichfield): When he last met representatives of the National Farmers Union to discuss beef and dairy farming. [85162]

The Secretary of State for Wales (Mr. Alun Michael): The National Assembly Secretary for Agriculture and Rural Affairs, Christine Gwyther, and I met representatives of the National Farmers Union on Monday 24 May, when we discussed a range of issues. They stayed in the room and probed us vigorously on a series of issues affecting farmers in Wales—which, of course, will be matters for the National Assembly in future.

Mr. Fabricant: Did those representatives probe the right hon. Gentleman about the fact that farm prices for milk have fallen by 25 per cent., and farm incomes in Wales by 41 per cent., since the Government came to power? Did they say how irritated they were with the Prime Minister's continual bragging at Prime Minister's Question Time about having singlehandedly lifted the beef ban, when not one kilogram of beef has been exported from Wales?

Mr. Michael: The hon. Gentleman conveniently reminds us that the Government whom he supported, who were in office until two years ago, signally failed to deal with the beef ban and to protect the interests of farmers in Wales, as well as in the rest of the United Kingdom. Yes, indeed: the NFU representatives took the opportunity provided by the meeting to debate the issues that he raises, because farmers in Wales have had an extremely difficult time. I suppose that we should take the hon. Gentleman's question as a form of apology for his Government.

PRIME MINISTER

The Prime Minister was asked—

Engagements

Q1. [85185] **Dr. Tony Wright** (Cannock Chase): If he will list his official engagements for Wednesday 9 June.

The Prime Minister (Mr. Tony Blair): This morning, I had meetings with ministerial colleagues and others. In addition to my duties in the House, I shall have further such meetings later today.

Dr. Wright: I congratulate the Prime Minister—[HON. MEMBERS: "Oh."] Wait for it. I congratulate the Prime Minister on having referred the issue of party funding to the Committee on Standards in Public Life. Is he aware that there is still a party that gets about one third of its income from its treasurer, who is a tax exile in Florida and who moonlights as the Belize ambassador at the

United Nations? When a party has to go, baseball cap in hand, to a billionaire in Belize for its funding, should Lord Neill not be asked to re-examine the issue?

The Prime Minister: It is precisely for those reasons that we are committed to introducing legislation. It was this Government who ensured that we could scrutinise party funding properly—*[Interruption.]* If the Leader of the Opposition denies the facts that my hon. Friend mentioned, perhaps he will say so now, when he asks his question.

Mr. William Hague (Richmond, Yorks): As we know, the only group who can buy votes and influence in a party are the trade unions in the Labour party. The comments of the hon. Member for Cannock Chase (Dr. Wright) are total rubbish. Does the Prime Minister think that the story of the euro so far—*[Interruption.]* We know that Labour Members do not like talking about the euro.

Does the Prime Minister think that the story of the euro so far—a story of fudged borrowing rules, exchange rate instability and economic divergence, all wrapped up with chaotic political handling—has weakened or strengthened the case for joining the single currency?

The Prime Minister: I believe that our position is the correct position—to support a successful single currency, to say that in practice the economic conditions must be met, and to make preparations so that this country has the option to join. The most foolish thing for this country to do would be to adopt the position that the right hon. Gentleman set out this morning for the Conservative party, and rule out the single currency for ever. That would not be in the interests of British jobs, British industry or British investment.

Mr. Hague: The question was whether those events had weakened or strengthened the case for joining the euro. Almost everyone in the country except the Prime Minister and the Chancellor thinks that that case has been weakened. The Italian Treasury Minister says:

"We have all agreed that the less we talk about the euro, the better it is".

He must have been in charge of the Labour party's election campaign. Does the Prime Minister seriously believe that the decision to allow the Italian Government to break its deficit rules—a decision to which the Chancellor was a party—has not weakened the case for joining the euro?

The Prime Minister: The case is as we set it out in February. If the right hon. Gentleman's position now is that we rule out joining the euro for ever, that is wrong. We have the correct position, which is that the test for joining is our national economic interest. That is because more than 50 per cent. of our trade is with Europe and more than 3 million jobs are dependent on Europe. The anti-Europeanism of the Conservative party is a betrayal of the British national interest.

Mr. Hague: My position is to keep the pound at the next election. The Prime Minister's position is to abolish the pound after the next election. He seems to think that recent events make no difference. Even the governor of the European central bank—one of the two people qualified to talk about it—has said that recent events have not done the euro any good. Has the Prime Minister seen the accumulating evidence, contained in the recent International Monetary Fund report, that the UK economy is diverging from the continental economies, not converging with them? Does he agree that that weakens the case for joining the euro?

The Prime Minister: It is correct that, under this Government, Britain has the lowest interest rates for more than 30 years, and that the public finances have been sorted out. However, I do not agree with the right hon. Gentleman. The case with regard to the euro remains as we set it out in February.

However, the right hon. Gentleman has now said that he rules out joining the euro at the next election, but apparently not at the election after that—a fatuous position to be in. There are two serious positions on this matter. One is ours, which is dependent on the national economic interest, and the other is to rule it out as a matter of principle. The right hon. Gentleman's position is to rule out joining for the next Parliament, but to rule it in for the Parliament after that. That is an absurd position, and has to do with the division in the Conservative party, not the national interest. If he wants to, in these European elections the right hon. Gentleman can make the case for ruling out the euro. I shall carry on addressing the British national interest, because that is in the interests of this country.

Mr. Hague: We are asking the Prime Minister to address the issues. People are sick and tired of him claiming to love the pound at election time and then committing us to abolishing it afterwards. Does he acknowledge that, increasingly, many politicians in other countries have spoken of the euro as the foundation of closer political union? Chancellor Schröder, with whom he was campaigning yesterday, called it a "stepping stone" to a political union. Is the Prime Minister so dogmatically committed to abolishing the pound that he cannot see that that major constitutional risk weakens the case for joining the euro?

The Prime Minister: Our position is not dogmatic; it is clear, and based on whether the euro is good for British jobs, investment and industry. It is a pragmatic position. What I was pointing out to the right hon. Gentleman is the absurdity of his position, which is that he rules out joining as a matter of principle at the next election, but that he rules it in as a matter of principle at the election after that.

The right hon. Gentleman has decided to define the modern Conservative party by its anti-Europeanism. For example, he is now saying—he said it again today—that he would renegotiate the terms of British entry into the European Union. *[Interruption.]* We see that Conservative Members behind him are nodding their heads. It would require all 14 other member states to agree that. When the right hon. Gentleman gets to his feet, will he name one other Government who support that position?

Mr. Hague: Is not it the truth that, irrespective of all the evidence, the Prime Minister wants to con the country into thinking that joining the euro is inevitable? *[Interruption.]*

Madam Speaker: Order. That is enough.

Mr. Hague: That is why he has committed us to join it in principle. Is not it the actual truth that this country

has a choice, and that it can make a success of the pound if it wishes to do so, and be in Europe without being run by Europe? People who want to impress that on the Prime Minister should vote for the Conservative party tomorrow.

The Prime Minister: We have made it clear that there will be a referendum of the British people, and the idea that we can bounce them one way or the other is absurd. The position that we have set out is surely sensible. The test is the national economic interest.

I have pointed out to the right hon. Gentleman the absurdity of his position, which rules out entry for the next election but not for the one after that. We have seen him sharing an election platform with Michael Portillo who, I am sure, is right behind him—knife in hand. Mr. Portillo's position is to rule out entry in principle and for good. For the European election campaign, the right hon. Gentleman has effectively adopted Michael Portillo's position on the pound. He wants to renegotiate British entry into the European Union and to cancel the changeover plan so that we cannot enter the euro even if we want to. During the past few days, he has also said that he wants to withdraw from the defence initiative that we have begun with our French colleagues. That is a recipe for leaving the United Kingdom with no strength, power or influence in Europe. No matter what short-term tactical gain he believes he will achieve, that is not in the strategic, long-term interests of Britain. Nor, I can honestly say, is it in the interests of the Conservative party.

Mr. David Lock (Wyre Forest): Can my right hon. Friend tell me what the attitude of the British Government would be if another country told the European Union that it would like to renegotiate the treaty of Rome, tear up the rules of the single market and turn the clock back 20 years? Does he agree that the British Government, like every other Government, would say that that was a preposterous stance that amounted to leaving the EU? Is the Opposition's policy of renegotiation really a fig leaf to cover up their intention to leave Europe entirely?

The Prime Minister: That is the logic of their position. The Leader of the Opposition cannot name a single Government who support his position, yet the Conservative party says that it would be right for Britain to remain in the European Union only if we were allowed to renegotiate our terms of entry. I can see Conservative Members nodding at that. Unless the right hon. Gentleman can name one Government who support his position, the logic of that position is that the Conservatives will have to leave the EU. Given that more than 50 per cent. of our trade is with Europe, that would be a mistake for Britain.

Mr. Paddy Ashdown (Yeovil): Judging by the exchanges that we have heard—*[Interruption.]* I shall take that as a welcome.

Judging by the exchanges that we have heard, it is clear that the vision of the leader of the Conservative party for Britain in Europe is nothing more than an exit sign in lights. Is not the choice before the British electorate tomorrow simple? We can have a Britain on the edge of Europe and preparing to get out of it, or a Britain prepared to play a constructive role in Europe, but determined to reform it. I suspect that the Prime Minister would like to be placed in the second category, so why is he opposed to more openness in the Council of Ministers and why were his Members of the European Parliament opposed to holding individual Commissioners to account for their actions? Why does his party oppose allowing the MEPs more powers to hold the Commissioners to account?

The Prime Minister: On his points of detail, the right hon. Gentleman is wrong about the Labour MEPs. They were among those in the European Parliament who managed to hold the Commission to account. On his first point, the right hon. Gentleman is right. We want to be in Europe and we want to reform it. That is one reason why we launched the reform document yesterday in Britain with Chancellor Schröder. It is remarkable that the Conservatives criticised us even for sharing a platform even with the leader of Germany. It is an extraordinary reflection on how extreme they are that they do not believe we should even share a platform with people who are our allies in the European Union.

Mr. Ashdown: The Prime Minister says that he wants reform in Europe. May I give one example of where the record parts company with the rhetoric? Not many weeks ago, a proposition was put down in Brussels by, as it happens, the Liberal Democrats to ensure that MEPs were paid expenses only against receipts. Labour MEPs blocked that proposition. Why?

The Prime Minister: That is completely wrong. We have supported the Members' statute, and have said its introduction should be quickened. We also proposed the anti-fraud office that the EU is setting up. The right hon. Gentleman's attempt to say that Labour MEPs have a bad record on reform is simply untrue. The reason why we have now got a chance of getting those things done is that if people vote for Labour MEPs, they are at least voting for people with some influence in the Parliament.

Dr. Brian Iddon (Bolton, South–East): In this national carers week, will my right hon. Friend join me in thanking all those who care for people with Down's syndrome? This week they are running their health alert campaign, which has shown that there is some discrimination in parts of the national health service against people with Down's syndrome. Will he join me and others to combat all forms of discrimination against people with learning difficulties?

The Prime Minister: Yes, I support that and, of course, it was as a result of this Government and the policy that we put forward some time ago that an extra £140 million has been committed for carers. I support fully what my hon. Friend said.

Q2. [85186] **Mr. Malcolm Moss** (North-East Cambridgeshire): Does the Prime Minister share the view of his Health Secretary that NHS staff are to blame for the recent rise in waiting lists because they took holidays at Easter?

The Prime Minister: He did not say that at all. What he did say, which is true, is that waiting lists are now 65,000 down from what we inherited at the last election, and I can tell the House today that waiting time figures are down as well.

Mr. Tony McNulty (Harrow, East): Can my right hon. Friend clarify the Government's position on the state

funding of parties? Further to the question of my hon. Friend the Member for Cannock Chase (Dr. Wright), it cannot be right for any party in this House to be so dependent on a tax exile billionaire for its funds. While he is at it, can he get to the end of an important issue: has the Conservative party paid back the £18,000 blood money from Milosevic?

Madam Speaker: Order. That was totally out of order and a waste of time.

Q3. [85187] **Mr. John M. Taylor** (Solihull): Will the Prime Minister support the Bill overwhelmingly backed in this House yesterday that would ban the import of meat from countries with low animal welfare standards?

The Prime Minister: As I think we said when the Bill passed yesterday—at least I hope we did—we will consider it carefully. We cannot give a guarantee because of the implications there may be for trade, but we will certainly look sympathetically at it. I thought that the hon. Gentleman was going to ask me about Europe, but then he agrees with me more than he agrees with those on his Front Bench on Europe.

Ms Hazel Blears (Salford): With the extension of NHS Direct and the introduction of walk-in health clinics, will the Prime Minister confirm that the Government intend to provide high-quality health services where and when people want them, in contrast to the Conservative party, which still believes that the only way to do that is for a privileged few to pay to go private?

The Prime Minister: As a result of the additional funding that we are putting in, there will be some 7,000 extra doctors and 15,000 extra nurses in the health service. About 1,000 GP practices are to be modernised and every accident and emergency department that needs it will be updated and renovated. Also, as a result of the walk-in centres and NHS Direct, people will have the best modern health service that we can have. It will take some time, but the health service will return to its principles of care at the point of need for all, irrespective of ability to pay. That stands in contrast to the comments of the Conservative party's health spokesman and spokeswoman who want to make sure that people are forced to go private rather than use the health service.

Q4. [85188] **Mr. Bernard Jenkin** (North Essex): May I remind the Prime Minister that when the Conservatives introduced the bus lanes on the M4 Heathrow spur, they were additional lanes that did not increase congestion? How are we to judge the success or failure of the bus lanes that his Government have introduced on the M4, which have caused enormous congestion and pollution? Are they just another Labour anti-car stunt to pander to the anti-car lobby?

The Prime Minister: No, they are not. They arise from a suggestion of the Highways Agency, and are an experiment that it is sensible to carry out. We shall consider the results of the experiment carefully, both in terms of congestion and of safety.

Q5. [85189] **Mrs. Sylvia Heal** (Halesowen and Rowley Regis): During national carers week, it is appropriate that we acknowledge the contribution made by millions of carers of all ages in providing personal care and support to many people with disabilities. My right hon. Friend will no doubt recall that, exactly a year ago today, he announced that the Government would introduce a national strategy for carers. The strategy was launched in February this year. It contained a pledge that social services would be allowed to provide services directly to carers as soon as possible. Will my right hon. Friend consider introducing such legislation as a priority?

The Prime Minister: I spoke earlier of the extra grant of £140 million over three years, which will enable local authorities to provide a wide range of services to give carers a break. As my hon. Friend will know, we intend to amend legislation to give local authorities powers to provide services directly to carers. In the context of that change, we will consider the case for extending direct payments to carers for the services.

Sir Nicholas Lyell (North-East Bedfordshire): Yesterday, the Prime Minister gave us the quite welcome news that the European Council had actually advocated lower business and labour costs. However, can he explain to the House why there is no mention—indeed no hint—of that policy in the manifesto for the European socialist party that he has adopted as Labour's manifesto for tomorrow's elections?

The Prime Minister: The policy set out clearly yesterday is in the document that I launched with Chancellor Schröder. In respect of what has happened in this country, we have cut corporation tax to its lowest level ever. I should have thought that the right hon. and learned Gentleman would welcome the fact that we now have the support of a leading country in Europe—Germany—in ensuring that we can lower business and labour costs. We cannot commit every country in Europe to that policy, but we believe that it is the right policy and we are building the necessary alliances in Europe to achieve it. That stands in stark contrast with his party's position—to build no alliances with anyone.

Q6. [85190] **Dr. Desmond Turner** (Brighton, Kemptown): The Prime Minister is to be congratulated on his efforts on the world stage in pursuit of world peace. Will he use his increasing world stature in the interest of reducing world poverty and, in particular, will he use it to help to persuade our more reluctant partners among the G8 countries, at the forthcoming Cologne summit, at least to support the proposals made by the Chancellor of the Exchequer so that we can make a substantive start on reducing the burden of international debt on the poorest countries in the world? *[Interruption.]*

The Prime Minister: I assume that that cheer is one of congratulation, and I accept the congratulations of my hon. Friend. I thank him very much indeed. His question is important because this country is at the forefront of initiatives to reduce third-world debt. That is important. We have announced a series of measures that would allow a cut of at least $50 billion in the debt of the world's poorest countries by the end of the year 2000. My right hon. Friend the Chancellor of the Exchequer has announced a $100 million further contribution to the trust fund set up to meet the costs falling to the World Bank

and other regional development banks. However much the Conservative party may decry those types of initiative to reduce third-world debt, large numbers of people in this country support measures to reduce third-world debt and understand—even if today's Conservative party does not—that our generosity does not stop at our shores.

Mr. Peter Bottomley (Worthing, West): Tomorrow many people will vote in the European elections. Will the Prime Minister join me in saying that this should be the first and the last time that not a single voter is able to vote for a single candidate in an election? It is a disgrace that no elector can affect what happens to a mainstream party candidate.

The Prime Minister: I do not agree. We had this debate during the passage through the House of the European Parliamentary Elections Act 1999. The policy is the right one because the new system is far simpler for voters and far better—it is a more democratic system. It is also a system under which we are bound to do less well. I disagree with the hon. Gentleman: not only is it the right system, but it is the system used by most other countries in the European Union.

Q8. [85192] **Mr. Barry Jones** (Alyn and Deeside): May I tell my right hon. Friend of the anxiety felt at Shotton steelworks in my constituency and at British Steel plc about the potential impact of the energy tax which, by 2001, might be some £230 million for the industry? Will he monitor the impact of the tax on industries in Britain? My steelworkers were glad that, yesterday, they were able to meet my hon. Friend the Economic Secretary to the Treasury and make their case—she said that she would consider the impact of the tax.

The Prime Minister: Any money raised by the climate change levy is given back to industry through cuts in national insurance costs. However, we understand that there are many energy-intensive industries that may have particular problems. For that reason, we have said that we will meet them and consult with them on the impact of the proposals, and we shall certainly do so.

Mr. Stephen Day (Cheadle): In view of the fact that another terrorist murder took place in Northern Ireland last week, and given that there has been no decommissioning of terrorist weapons, will the Prime Minister now call a halt to the release of terrorist prisoners? If his answer is no, will he explain to the House why he apparently treats terrorist murderers so leniently, but is so hard on British ex-soldiers?

The Prime Minister: First, anyone who has committed a crime after the time of the signing of the Good Friday agreement is not eligible for early release, so that response would not be appropriate. Those who are responsible for that appalling attack will not be eligible for early release.

Secondly, the hon. Gentleman and many other Conservative Members have, in effect, been saying for a significant period of time that we should bring the Good Friday agreement to an end—*[Interruption.]* They can shout and bawl as much as they like, but that is effectively what they have been asking for. I believe that that would be a mistake; it would be the wrong thing to do. We have now set a timetable to try to get over this last remaining difficulty.

I hope that the Conservative party will put the interests of people everywhere in the United Kingdom ahead of whatever views it might express that would undermine the agreement. I hope that it will support the Labour Government in the same way as we used to support the Conservative Government in getting the peace agreement through.

Radioactive Waste

Q9. [85193] **Mr. David Chaytor** (Bury, North): What plans he has to develop a policy on the long-term storage of radioactive waste.

The Prime Minister: Existing radioactive waste is stored at licensed sites under strict regulatory controls and in accordance with the highest international standards. We want to ensure that the long-term management of waste continues to ensure public safety and the protection of the environment. We shall publish a consultation paper on that around the end of the year.

Mr. Chaytor: I thank my right hon. Friend for that reply. In view of the latest research from Sussex university comparing the costs of reprocessing and of dry storage as methods of dealing with spent fuel, will he include the future of nuclear reprocessing in the terms of reference of the Green Paper?

The Prime Minister: I know that my hon. Friend has expressed that point of view and his concerns on several occasions. I assure him that the full range of safety, environmental and economic issues associated with reprocessing were considered in exhaustive detail during the process of consultation before THORP was commissioned. But if we were to question the continued operation of THORP, that would not be right. THORP is an operation with orders valued at some £12 billion, it provides 6,000 skilled jobs and it indirectly supports many more. We have to deal with the issue of radioactive waste, but I do not support the case of those who would like us to abandon THORP.

Engagements

Q10. [85194] **Mr. Simon Burns** (West Chelmsford): Why, based on the Government's figures, between 1 May 1997 and 31 March 1999 in the Mid Essex Hospital Services NHS trust area, has the number of people waiting 13 weeks or more for out-patient treatment risen from 555 to 2,422; the number of people waiting 12 months or more for hospital treatment risen from 104 to 1,093; and the total hospital waiting list figure increased by 1,500 people?

The Prime Minister: I do not know the details of the individual hospital. I am happy to accept the figures the hon. Gentleman gives, but I will check them if I may.

There is no doubt about the figures for the whole country: the waiting lists have fallen after years and years of rising. Waiting times in the whole country have fallen,

and more out-patients are now being treated than two years ago. The health authority deficits that we inherited were £500 million for the whole country. They came down to £100 million last year and, I can tell the House, now stand at £12 million. Yes, it will take us time to turn around a health service that under the Government the hon. Gentleman supported was undermined and ruined every day. It will take us time, but with the extra investment that we are putting in—more nurses, more doctors and more capital spending—everywhere, including mid-Essex, will feel the benefit at the next general election.

Points of Order

3.32 pm

Dr. Liam Fox (Woodspring): On a point of order, Madam Speaker. Following Welsh questions today, I wish to ask for your guidance before the next Scottish questions. As you know, in Scotland, there is now a formal coalition between the Liberal Democrats and the Labour party. Is it appropriate for the Liberals to be treated in this House as members of the Government in terms of Scottish questions or as members of the Opposition? In particular, what is the position of the hon. and learned Member for Orkney and Shetland (Mr. Wallace) who, although he sits on the Opposition Benches, is a Minister of the Crown?

Madam Speaker: I must tell the hon. Gentleman that I have already given the position some thought. Members of the Liberal Democrat party are not represented in Her Majesty's Government in this House, so as far as I am concerned, it remains an Opposition party. It is as clear as that.

Mr. Tam Dalyell (Linlithgow): On a point of order, Madam Speaker. The Prime Minister might reasonably have anticipated that at least one question in the past half hour would have referred to what has happened in the past 24 hours in Macedonia. Through no fault of the Prime Minister's, he was not asked such a question. In those circumstances, has there been any request from the Defence Secretary or the Prime Minister to make a report to the House of Commons? Surely we deserve to know what is happening, whatever one's view of the continuous bombing.

Madam Speaker: I must tell the hon. Gentleman and the House that I have had no indication that the Government are seeking to make a statement at this time.

Mr. Gerald Howarth (Aldershot): On a point of order, Madam Speaker. You will be aware that in January last year, the Prime Minister set up a second judicial inquiry into the events of Bloody Sunday, involving members of the 1st Battalion of the Parachute Regiment. I am distressed that the Prime Minister has slunk away from Question Time immediately. I wonder whether you have heard from him, in view of the fact that he has responsibility for security matters, that he intends to come to the House to explain why he refuses to accord the right of anonymity to those former members of the regiment who have been called to give evidence and whose lives are now at risk. This very afternoon, in advance of a hearing in the High Court tomorrow, the solicitors acting on behalf of the inquiry released to the relatives of those who died and were wounded in that incident the statements given by those soldiers containing their names, ranks and numbers.

Madam Speaker: Order. That is not a point of order for me. As I explained earlier, I have not been informed by any Minister—including the Prime Minister—that he or she is seeking to make a statement today about any issue.

Concessionary Television Licences for Pensioners

3.35 pm

Mr. David Winnick (Walsall, North): I beg to move,

That leave be given to bring in a Bill to extend the concessionary television licence entitlement to all pensioners living in households consisting only of pensioners; and for connected purposes.

It is more than 12 years since my private Member's Bill that sought to extend television licence concessions to all pensioner-only households was defeated by 21 votes. That occurred on 16 January 1987. I was pleased that the majority of Labour Members of Parliament came to the House on a Friday to support that measure, which was defeated as a result of the then Tory Government's imposing a three-line Whip on a private Member's Bill. Several Cabinet Ministers were shown on television being chauffeured to the House of Commons to vote down my measure.

Mr. Bill O'Brien (Normanton): Disgraceful.

Mr. Winnick: I could not agree more. The issue has certainly not gone away since then. I understand that the Department for Culture, Media and Sport receives more correspondence on this subject than on any other topic. I see the Minister nodding his head.

Several weeks ago, it was reported that the committee examining the future of BBC funding and the concessionary scheme had decided to recommend that all existing television licence concessions should go. Within hours of those press reports, the Government—I believe at the highest level—made it clear that any such recommendation would be rejected; and rightly so. I hope that Mr. Gavyn Davies and his committee—who are to report next month—will make a very different recommendation for pensioners.

I want to see the existing concession extended to all pension-only households. I believe that that is fair, and it is something for which I and many of my hon. Friends have campaigned for many years—even before I introduced my private Member's Bill in 1987. I accept that such a concession could probably be introduced only in stages because of the cost involved. While I would like to see the concession extended to all pensioner-only households—that is the purpose of my 10-minute rule Bill—I would welcome any compromise and progress towards its introduction on a wider scale. For example, the television licence fee could be halved for pensioners, it could be a third of its present cost or the concession could be granted to pensioners over 70 years of age. Those are some of the ways of achieving our objective.

Of course, we need good pensions. I sometimes hear the argument—not from my colleagues, but from various organisations—that a good basic pension, rather than concessions, is required. Which Labour Member is not in favour of a good basic pension? We have always called for that. However, that aim should not be used as an argument against concessions.

All pensioners in my own area, in London and in many other parts of the country receive a bus pass. Is that not right? Does it not assist pensioners a great deal? They certainly appreciate it. They would certainly have difficulty meeting the costs involved if they could not

travel for free on the buses at most times of the day. All Labour Members are again very pleased about the assistance that the Government have provided to pensioners with winter fuel bills. I remember arguing constantly from the Opposition Benches in previous Parliaments that such a payment should be introduced, and this Government provided that assistance as soon as they came to office. From next year, all pensioners will receive £100 towards their winter fuel bills. That demonstrates our concern for people of pensionable age.

It has also been argued that pensioner incomes have increased over the years. I accept that since I introduced my private Member's Bill 12 years ago, there has been a modest improvement, which is welcome. That is largely due to various occupational schemes taking effect as people have retired in the past few years. There should, however, be no misunderstanding: the latest figures demonstrate that 63 per cent. of pensioners are in the bottom half of income distribution. The figures for 1997-98 reveal that 42 per cent. of single pensioners were in the lowest fifth of household incomes. Clearly, many of our fellow citizens of pensionable age are experiencing poverty or near poverty.

I am often asked why I put so much emphasis on television. As they grow older, many pensioners find that their television set is extremely important, particularly in the winter months and if they live on their own. Television is an important link with the outside world, not simply a form of entertainment. Without television, there would undoubtedly be far more isolation and loneliness for the people to whom I have referred.

I could quote endlessly the letters that I have received from people around the country. Those who know of my concern write to me about my proposal to introduce a Bill on this matter. I shall refer to only one letter. A pensioner in Worcester wrote to me last month saying that she is a widow who receives, in all, £76.25 a week, and that for people such as herself, the television is the main source of news and entertainment and, in her case, the greatest companion. She concluded her letter by saying that a £5 fee would be a great help to her. How many more pensioners throughout the country take the same view?

There are anomalies in the current system. I receive letters from people who say that their pensioner next-door neighbour pays £5 while they must pay the full amount. We know the explanation for that. The Tory Government made it far more difficult for local authorities to make applications for concessionary television licences. There was a successful court case and the Conservative Government were frightened that the concessionary door was being opened too wide, so they tightened the restrictions in May 1988. Those who lived in certain accommodation prior to May 1988 therefore receive the concession, and rightly so, but those who moved in afterwards pay the full amount. One can imagine the resentment that they feel. That does not, I suppose, make for good relations between neighbours. That is one of the most blatant anomalies.

Other countries have more generous television licence schemes for pensioners. In the Irish Republic, licences are free for those who are entitled to the state pension. France and one or two other countries have schemes that are more generous than ours.

What about the cost? Of course, I accept that a substantial cost would be involved. That could be borne by the Exchequer or by an increase in the licence fee. After all, everyone hopes to reach pensionable age. If the measure were introduced in stages, the cost would be lower. If, in the first instance, the concession were given only to the over-70s or if the licence fee were reduced, as I have suggested, by a half or a third, there would be less cost to the BBC or the Exchequer. If the £5 concessionary fee was increased, but only—I stress the word "only"—if the scheme that I am advocating was introduced, that would also reduce the overall cost.

I do not for one moment accept that we cannot afford to introduce a more generous scheme. We are a rich, advanced country, and pensioners are absolutely right to ask for this reform. They have been campaigning for it far longer than I have been. We should make a move in the right direction, so I decided to introduce this ten-minute Bill. I hope that the Government will give it serious consideration and that, over time, we shall make the progress on this issue that so many of us want.

Question put and agreed to.

Bill ordered to be brought in by Mr. David Winnick, Mr. Peter Bradley, Mr. Hilton Dawson, Mr. Lindsay Hoyle, Mr. Martin Salter, Mr. Ken Purchase, Mr. David Drew, Mr. Nigel Griffiths, Mrs. Maria Fyfe, Valerie Davey, Mrs. Ann Cryer and Mr. Jeremy Corbyn.

Concessionary Television Licences for Pensioners

Mr. David Winnick accordingly presented a Bill to extend the concessionary television licence entitlement to all pensioners living in households consisting only of pensioners; and for connected purposes: And the same was read the First time; and ordered to be read a Second time on Friday 23 July, and to be printed [Bill 115].

House of Lords Reform

Motion made, and Question proposed, That this House do now adjourn.—*[Mr. Hanson.]*

3.46 pm

The President of the Council and Leader of the House of Commons (Mrs. Margaret Beckett): Although it is, of course, right and proper that we debate the White Paper, I doubt whether hon. Members will find much new in what I propose to say. The legislation that the White Paper accompanies is very much stage 1 of an enduring process. Although the White Paper provides the context for the legislation that it describes, it also sets the framework for a royal commission and for further legislation. That first stage of reform is still being debated in the House of Lords—the House of Lords Bill will return to this House—while the second stage is now with the royal commission.

The legislation reforms the House of Lords by abolishing the right to sit and vote there on the basis of heredity alone, without regard for the personal qualities or qualifications of the inheritor. As the White Paper identifies, the effect of that decision—should it be carried through into law—will be to create a transitional House of about half the present size, in which every Member will sit as a result of their own achievement and reputation.

That is certainly preferable to the present position, but it still in our view has serious flaws. Although it diminishes the permanent in-built Conservative majority, there would still be, for example, a wholly disproportionate representation of the main parties—even in a transitional House that is created solely by the removal of hereditary peers. That is because of the exploitation of the Prime Minister's sole power of patronage during the 1980s and 1990s, which led to the creation of infinitely more Conservative life peers than those of any other party, and exacerbated the in-built Conservative majority among hereditary peers.

That position is certainly unacceptable to my party, although I have noted that, in the many debates on this matter in the House of Lords, the proposal to remove that in-built majority has been described pejoratively as acting "to our own"—the Labour party's—"advantage". On the contrary, we strongly believe that it is to the country's advantage that no political party has an overall majority in the House of Lords. That is the principle that we are enshrining in the arrangements for the transitional House, seeking only parity with the Conservative party.

Such a principle has, on occasion, been espoused by the Conservative party itself, but it has been most notable that, whether in this House or in the House of Lords, today's Conservatives have been most reluctant to accept that national interest should override the political interests of the Conservative party.

Rather than following the precedent created by his Conservative predecessors, the present Prime Minister is determined to diminish the unfettered power of patronage that he now enjoys—although nobody would think so to listen to some of the rubbish that has been uttered from the Opposition Benches during many of our debates. The Prime Minister is, for the first time ever, to forgo his power to object to the names of those nominated by other party leaders.

We are to set up an appointments commission—using machinery devised by the previous Government, to ensure a proper process of appointment—with a suitable independent element, as well as representation from the political parties. That appointments commission will take over the job of scrutinising proposals for adding Members to the House of Lords. The whole process will, therefore, be much more transparent and independent than ever in the past, and will represent the first ever diminution of the sole power of patronage enjoyed by a Prime Minister in Britain's history.

Against the background of the creation of the transitional House, the Government have also proposed the setting up of the royal commission—itself chaired not by a Labour, but by a Conservative peer, and with a balanced and independent-minded membership. We have given the royal commission a tight timetable, and we acknowledge that. However, those who criticise us for the timetable being too tight are, in many cases, the very same people who said that unless the royal commission worked to a tight timetable, it would prove that the Government had no intention of going beyond stage 1 and the transitional House. They really cannot have the argument both ways. The tight timetable for the royal commission is itself evidence of the Government's good faith in seeking proper and fundamental reform of the House of Lords. It is also evidence of our practicality in trying to ensure that, on this occasion, after more than a century of debate, it is actually achieved.

Sir Patrick Cormack (South Staffordshire): Will the right hon. Lady acknowledge that Conservative Members were calling for a royal commission for more than a year before it was established?

Mrs. Beckett: I acknowledge that Conservative Members have called for a royal commission, although I also acknowledge that they nevertheless resist any attempt at change. As I shall say later in my speech, one of the Government's objectives is to ensure that the royal commission will be able to take account of other constitutional change. The commission would not have been able to do that if it had been established earlier.

The Government have established some broad principles against which the royal commission should begin its work. It is asked to consider, first, the role of a second Chamber; then, the powers required to fulfil that role; and, finally, the composition of the body that should be established to exercise those powers and perform that role. That seems to us to be the only sensible and logical way in which to hold a proper debate on the new second Chamber. We have never had such a debate in Britain before.

All previous discussions have tended to begin with the matter of composition, partly because the composition of the current House is so self-evidently unjustifiable. They have also been dominated by composition because—perhaps unsurprisingly—the principle preoccupation of many Members of the current House of Lords has been their own role in a new second Chamber, and whether and to what degree they might continue to exercise legislative power. Therefore, the stranglehold that they have enjoyed over any previous attempt at reform has ensured that the debate has almost always begun with composition, and been driven very heavily by what they were prepared to

accept in a successor body. That has created an artificial context for previous debates, so that what a second Chamber ought to be has never been properly considered.

The House of Lords Bill cuts that Gordian knot. It allows us to begin as we should, by considering what Britain needs and not what hereditary peers are prepared to accept. However, just as the House of Lords Bill enables us to separate stage 2, and what should come in the future, from stage 1 and the first steps of the reform process, it is extremely important to encourage the new debate without allowing it to be bogged down in comparisons, valid or otherwise, with the current House of Lords.

Dr. Liam Fox (Woodspring): Perhaps for the sake of clarity, will the right hon. Lady tell us whether, in general, she believes that a reformed upper House should have more, the same or fewer powers than the current one?

Mrs. Beckett: I shall tell the hon. Gentleman that later in my speech. If he will forgive me, I shall not do so now, as I want to make a specific point that should underpin the debate.

I very much hope that we—by which I mean not only those participating in the debate, but everyone who engages with the issue—shall free ourselves from looking at the House of Lords as it is and saying what we should make different, whether in its powers or its composition, and instead begin from first principles, by considering not what people have been criticising or even campaigning for, but what type of new second Chamber Britain actually needs.

Mr. Robert Maclennan (Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross): I am extremely encouraged to hear the Leader of the House speak in those principled terms about the role of the House of Lords. Does she think that, conformable with those terms, the commission should not listen to siren voices suggesting that a reformed upper House should depend on actions taken in this House to reform itself, but that—although there are connections between the two Houses' roles and functions—the commission's job is one that can properly be carried very far by simply examining the functions of the second Chamber?

Mrs. Beckett: The right hon. Gentleman is right. The commission would find it difficult to get engaged in that area of argument and doing so would make it very difficult for it to report within the time required.

Mr. Douglas Hogg (Sleaford and North Hykeham): While it is right that the commission should address the functions of the second Chamber, in determining what those functions are, should it not consider the extent to which this House properly performs its democratic role of holding the Executive to account?

Mrs. Beckett: No. That is not the business of the commission. It was set up to consider the role of the second Chamber. If there is concern about the operation of this House, it is for this House, not a royal commission to tell us what to do.

Mr. Oliver Letwin (West Dorset) *rose—*

Mrs. Beckett: I want to get on, but I shall give way briefly.

Mr. Letwin: I do not want to detain or distract the right hon. Lady, but does she not recognise that there is an intrinsic relationship between the two issues? The role of the second Chamber must depend to an extent on the effectiveness of the lower Chamber.

Mrs. Beckett: I do not accept that point and I shall explain why. There is clearly a relationship between this Chamber and the second Chamber. When the hon. Gentleman talks about the effectiveness of this Chamber, I suspect that, like his right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Sleaford and North Hykeham (Mr. Hogg), he is seeking to pursue the ridiculous Conservative argument that the present Government cannot be scrutinised in the way that previous Governments were, and that that shows some in-built failing in the House. The effectiveness with which we conduct our business is a matter for Members of Parliament, not for the royal commission.

Mr. Robert Sheldon (Ashton-under-Lyne): I am sorry to ask my right hon. Friend so many questions at this stage in her speech. Does she agree that the role of a second Chamber is not to remedy the deficiencies of this Chamber? There have been many changes over the past 20 years and more. Should we not make sure that the system is brought into line with what is required rather than using the other Chamber to cope with our deficiencies?

Mrs. Beckett: I share my right hon. Friend's view that if there are deficiencies in this House, it is for this House to address and deal with them. It is strange to argue that we have to set up another House to do so. There is a different role for a second Chamber.

That intervention ties in neatly with the point that I was about to make—and may yet make. The starting point in the debate for some people is to ask whether we need a second Chamber. They are the so-called unicameralists, who can be found on both sides of the House, although not in substantial numbers, I think. No doubt that will emerge over time. Those of us who accept that there is a need and a role for a second Chamber must explain why.

It has always been argued that the value of a second Chamber is to provide not merely an alternative group to scrutinise and comment on Government activity, particularly the legislative programme, but a group with different experiences and perspectives. Those who have argued for some of the virtues of the existing House of Lords have almost always said that they lie in some of the differences between that Chamber and this one. In particular, they have argued strongly for keeping some people from outside the mainstream world of politics that leads to the House of Commons and for there to be at least some people in that House who do not take a party Whip. As the Government have pointed out in the terms of reference of the royal commission, the creation of the new devolved bodies, and the growing role and increasing powers of the European Parliament have created a different context in which the role of a new second Chamber should be considered.

We do not seek to dictate answers in the White Paper. We seek to address the issues that should inform the shaping of those answers and we try to set out some of the principles that any proposals should meet. The first is that this House must continue to be the pre-eminent Chamber of Parliament. That is a principle which I hope that every Member of this House would wholeheartedly endorse. I am unashamedly a House of Commons woman

[Mrs. Beckett]

through and through, and it has been most noticeable that one of the most potent weapons of those who have opposed change down the years has been any threat, real or potential, to the pre-eminence of the House of Commons. That suggests that Members of this House through the decades have shared the Government's view on this important point.

We have not nor would we ever propose to change the power of the second Chamber to veto any extension of the life of a Parliament. The legitimacy of government comes from the endorsement of the people and, of course, it must be renewed at regular intervals.

My brief summary of the Government's approach to the issues of role, powers and composition is that there is a role for a second body and a second process of scrutiny, and that the needs of that process should direct the powers that it requires. It is only then that one comes to consider what should be the nature of the body to exercise those powers, how such a body might be composed and how its members might be chosen.

I do not propose to say much about the powers that would be needed by a second Chamber retaining the important roles of revision and scrutiny, but, picking up the question asked by the hon. Member for Woodspring (Dr. Fox), one important point is that there is enormous confusion, particularly outside the House, in much of what has already been said about the powers that a new second Chamber should have.

Almost every time I hear somebody comment on powers, I find myself wondering whether they are referring to the powers that the House of Lords has now or to the powers that it currently exercises. It is somewhat strange to hear those who argue against any change, because the present House of Lords does a brilliant job, going on to argue—as some do—that that job cannot be done adequately without fresh powers that the House of Lords does not exercise at present. They cannot have it both ways. Either the present House of Lords is not doing much of a job—which I do not myself argue—or what is the justification for saying that more powers will be required in future to do the job it does now.

Let me make it clear, as does the White Paper, that the House of Lords has almost all the powers enjoyed by the House of Commons. If it gets more, it will probably have more power than the House of Commons. Is that really what some Conservatives are asking for? If so, they are in danger of saying that a new second Chamber should supersede this one and that it should be the pre-eminent Chamber. That is a dangerous and damaging argument.

I suspect that that is not what most of them think, but I also suspect that on this issue, as on many others, sheer opportunism and the inability to look further than the ends of their noses is leading them gleefully to advocate ideas on the basis of what they hope will embarrass the Government in the short term, without their apparently giving any real thought to the impact of what they are proposing on the country in the long term. That is playing with fire and if it persists with those tactics, the Conservative party will go down in history as the party that sought to undermine the authority of the elected House of Commons.

Without going into the detail of what should be the composition of a new second Chamber, there are some principles we could identify which might attract a degree of agreement and common ground.

Mr. John MacGregor (South Norfolk): On the point about powers, is the right hon. Lady saying that she would not wish any new powers to be given to the House of Lords?

Mrs. Beckett: I do not want to pre-judge any view that the Government might wish to express at some time, but given that the House of Lords has almost all the powers enjoyed by the House of Commons—although it does not exercise them all—if the right hon. Gentleman is asking me to agree to more powers for that House, he is in danger of putting those who advocate this case in a position of arguing for more powers for the second Chamber than for the House of Commons. I do not support such a proposition and I would be surprised if the right hon. Gentleman did.

Mr. Tam Dalyell (Linlithgow): Will my right hon. Friend forgive me if I ask a question that I have been asked by one of my constituents—a serious constituent—and will she give me some advice on how to answer it? My constituent asked whether it is proper that the Speaker of the Holyrood Parliament should also be a Member of the House of Lords, and whether that creates some problems of interface between the House of Lords and the Holyrood Parliament? I do not expect my right hon. Friend to answer this somewhat arcane question off the top of her head, but perhaps she might write to me at her convenience.

Mrs. Beckett: I am deeply grateful to my hon. Friend for allowing me the courtesy of writing to him about it. He is right. I fear that it is not a matter on which I feel emboldened to venture off the cuff. It is, indeed, a serious constitutional point, not only for the House of Lords or indeed for this Parliament, and it is certainly interesting. I am not surprised that my hon. Friend is not sure how to answer it; I am not either, but I shall take advice.

Without getting into the detail of what should be the composition of a new second Chamber, we can identify some principles that might attract a degree of agreement and common ground. The body itself should be more legitimate than it is now; it should be stable; it should be a suitable body to revise and scrutinise; it should be distinctive and embody real expertise. It should represent a range of economic and social interests and have independence—both in the sense that its members should feel free to express their opinions honestly and in the sense that no political party should command a majority.

Hon. Members will be aware that, although the Government have not given evidence to the royal commission, the Labour party has. I have not been part of that consultation process, but I have talked with some of those who have. The process seems to have been most interesting, both in its conduct and in its outcome.

I am told by those who attended the Labour party's regional consultation that there was a thorough, well-informed and practical debate. Much to the surprise of some who took part in that consultation, there was apparently little appetite for the prospect of and potential

for that confrontation which seems to be the chief hope and expectation, perhaps inevitably, of many media commentators.

Ordinary members of our party were interested in a process where voices other than those of the House of Commons could be heard; experience other than ours could be aired and points of view different from the points of view naturally held and expressed in this Chamber could be taken into account. I am told that there was little if any appetite for duplicating this Chamber and none for a built-in process of confrontation. Mature debate, and mature and considered decision taking seem to be what members of the Labour party who gave evidence to our consultation seek, and what they urge on the royal commission.

It is a reminder to us, irrespective of party, of what our citizens expect of Parliament—mature debate, and mature and considered decision taking. I believe that the White Paper and the process it sets in train is an important step along the road of creating a better forum for decision and debate in the future—a forum that will not merely replace, but greatly improve what we have now.

4.8 pm

Dr. Liam Fox (Woodspring): I am grateful that the Leader of the House has finally got round to having a debate on the White Paper and grateful, too, for the tone of her speech, which was much more conciliatory than the one that she used on the launch of the White Paper. It is healthy that the debate is being conducted more in today's atmosphere rather than in that of the unfortunate first opening salvo.

It is rather strange that the right hon. Lady should not only fail to say anything new today, but effectively apologise for the Government having no views on taking forward one of the flagship proposals in their manifesto. We are finally getting to talk about stage 2 of the reform, but all that we are getting is a clear admission that the Government have embarked upon it without knowing what they actually want. We always suggested that that was the case—that the Government had no idea of what they wanted as part of the process that they set out in their manifesto—and today we have heard the clearest possible admission that that is the case.

Mr. Peter L. Pike (Burnley): If my right hon. Friend the Leader of the House had said exactly what we wanted to do at the second stage, would not the hon. Gentleman have accused us of setting up a royal commission on a totally false basis? The Government have quite rightly appointed a royal commission to look at the issue and the Labour party, as a political party separate from the Government, has submitted views.

Dr. Fox: The hon. Gentleman, who has attended some of our previous debates, will know that the Opposition's position is that a royal commission could have been set up two years ago, when the Government came to power. We could now have been at the conclusion of that royal commission, and discussing the move towards single-stage reform by consensus. That opportunity was lost by the Government. The Opposition pushed for a royal commission, which the Government did not want, at the outset of the reform process. The Government were pushed into it by the Opposition's demands.

Mrs. Beckett: Before the hon. Gentleman gets too carried away with the notion that we might have had consensus about single-stage reform, may I remind him that the Conservative party went into the last election saying that it wanted to keep the hereditary principle?

Dr. Fox: The right hon. Lady will know that we have said consistently that we would look at reform that we thought was in the national interest and that improved the way in which the UK was governed. However, we have always opposed stage 1 reform without any idea of what stage 2 would entail. Clearly, the Government have no idea what they are embarking upon, but that goes for all of their constitutional changes. They have not thought through any of their policies, and we will suffer as a result. However, that is par for the course for the Government, who start projects with no idea of how they are to finish.

The royal commission could have been finished by now, but there is delay. The initial deadline was December this year, but perhaps the Leader of the House can tell us whether that will now be as late as March or April next year. There are rumours that the royal commission will be allowed to sit longer if it wishes. How much longer will it be given? How long will the Joint Committee take?

All hon. Members will have worked out that the timetable will take us perilously close to the next general election, almost certainly making sure that no legislation could be proposed to implement stage 2 before that election. Therefore, we will go to the general election not knowing the outcome of that election in terms of the composition of the House of Commons, and not knowing the nature of the Parliament in terms of its structure. That is entirely unacceptable. There is a suggestion that the Government want to kick this matter into the long grass to prevent divisions in their own party on the subject, in the run-up to the next election.

I want to take the Leader of the House to task on some of the points that she raised because—as with the Prime Minister at Question Time today—rather than dealing with the real policies of the Opposition, she simply invented Opposition policies to try to knock them down.

We must look at the role of Parliament as a whole. I fundamentally disagree with the Leader of the House when she says that reform of the House of Lords can be looked at in isolation. What happens in one part of Parliament necessarily impacts on the functioning of the other. Therefore, we need to look at Parliament as a complete entity. We cannot deal with one Chamber in isolation.

The assumption from the remit of the royal commission is that the House of Commons will not be reformed, and that therefore the commission has to make changes to the House of Lords to increase its powers of scrutiny or to get it to work better. Given that the royal commission is not able to look at the workings of the House of Commons, that is the only assumption that I can make. We have said that we must look at a series of relationships, and not only that of the two Chambers in this Parliament. Given the other changes to our constitutional framework, other relationships must be looked at.

The first of those is the relationship between Parliament and the Executive. The Leader of the House said that the Opposition were pretending that, in some way, this Government were not being scrutinised as well as

[Dr. Fox]

previous Governments. Our argument has been that Parliament as a whole has been unable to scrutinise any Executive in recent years, and that is a fundamental flaw. Governments in office—including Conservative Governments—necessarily think that, having got the power, they do not want it scrutinised too much.

If we are to have a meaningful debate on reform, the House of Commons must get some of its self-respect back and decide that the Executive need to be brought to account better for the sake of the good governance of the United Kingdom. We will have to make sure that the House of Lords has suitable powers of scrutiny to bring the Executive to account.

Having spent two years in the Government Whips Office, I am all too aware of the power that the Whips exert, partly because there is no alternative career structure to the patronage handed out by the Executive. We must include that in our consideration of the way in which Parliament as a whole operates.

Mr. Edward Leigh (Gainsborough): I understand that the Opposition are veering towards having an elected element in the second Chamber. If we give the second Chamber an advise and consent role, we must ensure that the elected politicians in it should not themselves be the beneficiaries of any ministerial or other patronage. It is absolutely vital that we do not create a new cadre of ambitious elected career politicians.

Dr. Fox: I will deal later with the Conservative proposals under the Mackay commission, but my hon. Friend's general point is extremely important, and I hope that he will expand on it later in the debate.

Parliament must consider other relationships. One of the factors that makes the Leader of the House wrong to say that we can undertake reform of one Chamber in isolation is the role of the judiciary. Given the Human Rights Act 1998 and other changes in the political nature of the judiciary, it is inevitable that there will be a new relationship between the judiciary and both Houses of Parliament. We cannot divorce one from the other.

Mrs. Beckett: How does the hon. Gentleman square his expressed desire for stage 2 to be implemented before the next general election with his further list of things that he thinks that the royal commission should scrutinise before stage 2 reform takes place?

Dr. Fox: That has to be part of a wider process. I would welcome a broader remit to consider how the whole of Parliament works and how all the changes are to be implemented. It was not the Conservative party but the Government who set the artificial timetable for the changes. We would all have been better served if they had started the process two years earlier and taken account of the broader arguments. It is unfortunate, in terms of the wider picture, if the Government really think that we can reform one Chamber in isolation.

We must also consider the relationships between Parliament and other bodies that have arisen as a result of Acts of Parliament: not least, the devolved bodies in Wales and Scotland. The hon. Member for Linlithgow (Mr. Dalyell) mentioned the relationship between the Presiding Officer's roles in both the Scottish Parliament and the House of Lords. That is a valid point that must be considered, as must Parliament's relationship with Europe.

The Leader of the House mentioned the legislation that comes from the European Union. I wonder whether there are many hon. Members who believe that we really fulfil our primary duty to scrutinise the way in which we legislate in the name of the people whom we are chosen to represent. With the vast amount of secondary legislation that goes through Parliament, do we believe that we are performing our democratic role of ensuring that it is all properly scrutinised and that we are not passing legislation affecting our fellow citizens that we are unhappy about?

It would be an ideal role for the second Chamber to play a greater part in the scrutiny of secondary legislation. I hope that that will be considered as a positive suggestion. It is not true that, to increase the powers of scrutiny of the second Chamber, one has necessarily to reduce the powers of the House of Commons. It is entirely possible to increase the powers of scrutiny of the House of Lords at the expense of the Executive without in any way diminishing the House of Commons.

Mr. Hogg: I entirely agree with my hon. Friend's point, but would it not be better if the House were to take unto itself the power to amend statutory instruments? One of the most objectionable features of secondary legislation is that it is incapable of change unless it is laid before the House in draft form, and then it depends on the will of the Government to change the draft.

Dr. Fox: That is an extremely important point, and we shall all have to think seriously about it in the context of the wider reforms. The shadow Leader of the House is considering it as part of the Conservative party's review of those wider subjects, and we are right to do that. My right hon. and learned Friend may want to make an internal submission to contribute to the thinking and policy development of the Conservative party, which is showing all the signs of being light years ahead of any development on the Government side.

The idea that the only way to increase the power of the House of Lords is at the expense of the House of Commons is false. It is an argument used by the Executive to protect their power from increased scrutiny.

As I have said, we must seriously consider whether we give Members of the House of Commons an alternative career structure that does not depend on keeping the Whips happy. As my hon. Friend the Member for Ribble Valley (Mr. Evans) said in a previous debate, the present system of getting rid of the hereditaries, but keeping the powers of the Whips, simply means, "Out with the ermine and in with the straitjackets."

We do not want the power of the Executive to increase as a result of what the Government are doing. We must still believe that the results of their actions, if not their intentions—I have great doubts about those—will not weaken Parliament as a whole in relation to the Executive.

I hope that the Leader of the House will accept the fact that we have never questioned the legitimacy of the Government's carrying out their manifesto commitment to abolish the voting rights of the hereditary peers. We have always said that we welcome reform if it results in

the better governance of this country. However, we have questioned the wisdom of what the Government are doing, their timetable and their motives, because we believe that they are motivated not by an interest in improving the way in which Parliament works but in further sidelining Parliament to the benefit of Ministers. That will result in a move towards de facto single-chamber government.

There is a suspicion among the Opposition that many people within the Government would welcome that. The way in which the House of Commons has been treated by members of the Executive can only strengthen that suspicion. To set up a House of Lords chosen entirely by nomination by the Prime Minister or by agents appointed by him would undermine the independence of the upper House.

There seems to be a disturbing pattern of authoritarianism in the Labour proposals. That includes the other constitutional changes, as voters will find out tomorrow, when they realise that they cannot choose which candidate to vote for. That is all about centralising power; it increases the power of politicians while diminishing the power of the voters.

It is therefore difficult for us to have faith that the Government's intention in the reform of Parliament is not to weaken Parliament to the benefit of the Executive. There is little support out there for creating an appointed House. It is hard to find anyone who supports the Government in their option of an appointed Chamber, even as an interim measure.

Lord Irvine, the Lord Chancellor, said:

"I think that it would be very important to avoid the perception of the biggest quango in our nation's history".

That is exactly what will be created if the policies in Labour's submission are carried forward, and many of us believe that that is exactly what the Prime Minister wants. There is a great risk of creating a compliant halfway house of yes men, which the Prime Minister, in particular, would like to last as long as possible.

According to reports, the Prime Minister does not bother to take particularly seriously either his duties in the Palace of Westminster, or his duties to attend Cabinet. As we all know, he is increasing the central power of the political machinery at the expense of the parties in the country and of individual voters.

Anthony Barnett, the former director of Charter 88, said:

"Surely Labour should first decide how it will replace the Lords with a democratic Chamber? Otherwise it will create an Upper House that is so pliant and illegitimate that it will expose the government to the charge of dictatorship".

Charter 88 said that, not the Conservatives.

Mr. Bill Rammell (Harlow): If the hon. Gentleman opposes an appointed second Chamber, does that mean that the Conservative party will support a wholly elected second Chamber? If not, what proportion of the new Chamber's composition will be derived through elections?

Dr. Fox: The hon. Gentleman makes an utterly illogical leap from one position to the other. He can look at the Conservative party's submission to the royal commission, but this problem was created by the Government. He should not look to the Opposition for ways out of the hole dug by the Government. That is what Governments are for and, when the Minister replies to the debate this evening, we shall expect some answers.

Mr. Rammell *rose—*

Dr. Fox: I shall come to the Mackay commission and the proposals put forward by the Conservative party in a moment. I hope that the hon. Gentleman will bear with me a little.

I want to mention one other opinion on the appointed Chamber. Vernon Bogdanor, professor of politics at Oxford university, has said:

"It is by no mean obvious why the ability to defer the wishes of one's party leader constitutes a better title to a place in a legislative chamber than the claims of hereditary. Labour's proposals for a purely nominated chamber would involve a quite unacceptable increase in prime ministerial patronage."

We are supposed to believe that, because the Prime Minister will give up his ability to nominate Cross Benchers, that will be all right. However, that is more than offset by the exclusion of any independent element. I shall return to that in moment.

We have always advocated that there must be an independent element in any upper Chamber for it to be effective.

Mrs. Beckett: I hope that the hon. Gentleman is not pretending that the Government are taking out the independent element in the upper House. Is he arguing that the only people who can be independent are the hereditary peers? If so, most of the rest of the House of Lords would find that very insulting.

Dr. Fox: One reason for the Government's keenness to press ahead with the changes is that they do not like any independent criticism. They will find that many peers—hereditary and otherwise—will have the courage to do what Labour Back Benchers did not have the courage to do over the Welfare Reform and Pensions Bill. I am sure that the electorate will thank them for that.

By their every change to our constitutional arrangements, the Government are trying to diminish the power of those who are able to influence the political process but who do not belong to a political party. That is one of the most disturbing trends of the Government's proposals.

Mrs. Beckett *indicated dissent.*

Dr. Fox: The right hon. Lady shakes her head, but I shall give her an example. The people who are able to choose who will sit in the European Parliament are not the voters in an election but the party bosses in their party headquarters. That increases the power of the parties, and decreases the power of any independent element, including that of the electorate.

Mrs. Beckett: I look forward to the next general election, when—the hon. Gentleman seems to be saying—every constituency will be offered a choice of Conservative candidates. If that is not what the hon. Gentleman is saying, he is making a stupid point—not for the first time. He pretends that, in some way, the electorate have lost a power, which they enjoyed in

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the past, to choose individual candidates from political parties. In his constituency, the hon. Gentleman stands as the sole representative of the Conservative party, as I stand as the sole representative of the Labour party in mine. There is nothing unusual about that.

With regard to the possibility of making a different change, all hon. Members are worried about the level of interest in, and concern about, the European elections, because we all recognise that the European Parliament has important powers. Given the present size of ballot papers, does the hon. Gentleman agree that people would be put off if they were also asked to pick out individual candidates? I am sure that people could do so, but whether they could be bothered is quite another matter.

Dr. Fox: I thought that the right hon. Lady was going to keep up her conciliatory tone for an entire debate, and not descend to her usual level. I am reassured to find that she has done so in the end.

What will happen in tomorrow's European elections is symptomatic of what the Government are doing, in that the power of the parties over the electorate will be increased, as I shall describe. If one of those elected under a list system drops out, it is up to the political parties to decide who should replace him or her. The electorate have no say: that is a clear example of how the parties are trying to centralise their authority.

We had the utter nonsense of the recent debate in the Scottish Parliament, in which list members were told that their job was not to represent constituents—for which they get less money—but to represent the political parties. What sort of democratic obscenity is it when Parliament is supposed to represent the politicians rather than the people? Democracy is being stood on its head by the Government's arguments. Labour Members will have a real difficulty when the Bill comes back from the House of Lords. Let me remind the House of what Labour's manifesto said:

"The House of Lords must be reformed. As an initial, self-contained reform, not dependent on further reform in the future, the right of hereditary peers to sit and vote in the House of Lords will be ended by statute. "

We have all heard Ministers mocking hereditary peers and saying how unacceptable it is that they sit in the House of Lords. The Home Secretary said that the first fundamental objection to the position of the hereditary peers was that they were hereditary. He said that we should

"imagine lying open-mouthed in the dentist's chair as the dentists drilled into the gum instead of the teeth. That would raise questions about his skills. Imagine if, when asked to produce his certificate of competence, he brought out one awarded in 1860 to his great great uncle William, but said not to worry because the skills had been transmitted through the genes."—[*Official Report*, 30 November 1998; Vol. 321, c. 571.]

I remember hearing howls of laughter from Labour Back Benchers, the same Back Benchers who trekked through the Lobby to vote down the Weatherill amendment when it was offered in this House. We know that, once the proposals have been accepted in the House of Lords, the same Back Benchers will, on the instruction of their Whips, vote for them, in direct contravention of their manifesto.

Mr. Rammell: As we are in the business of trading embarrassments, will it not be a greater embarrassment for the Conservatives and their leader to vote for a proposal for which the Leader of the Opposition sacked the Conservative leader of the Lords?

Dr. Fox: We all make mistakes when we take interventions. The hon. Gentleman fails to understand that the situation at that time had nothing to do with the content of the proposals but arose over agreement to a deal that no one but the shadow Cabinet had the authority to accept.

Mr. Hogg: My hon. Friend has precisely described why this House is failing to discharge its role of holding the Executive to account. It is true of all Governments, not only the present one, that they use their Whips to ensure that Back Benchers do whatever the Government want. In this case, that means either voting for or against the Weatherill amendment. That is what is so destructive of truly accountable Government.

Dr. Fox: What is most damaging about this episode is that the Government have not even pretended to act from a point of principle. They said that they would do whatever was necessary. If that meant countermanding their manifesto, they would tolerate that. If it meant blatantly forcing Members to go back on what they had previously voted for, the Government would force them to do so. Perhaps the Leader of the House will confirm that the Government intend to march their troops through the Lobby to vote for the Weatherill proposals. That seems the only logical position given that the Government backed those proposals in the House of Lords. Will the Leader of the House tell us that?

Mrs. Beckett: No.

Dr. Fox: Perhaps it is too embarrassing for her to admit what the Government are going to do to their Back Benchers.

Mrs. Beckett: I certainly shall not comment and nor shall my hon. Friend the Parliamentary Secretary, Privy Council Office. The hon. Gentleman may not have noticed, but the other place has not yet finished with the Bill.

Dr. Fox: What courage, what leadership, what great principle.

Mrs. Beckett: Let me explain to the hon. Gentleman in words of one syllable what I meant. Amendments have been tabled to the Weatherill amendment, and none of us knows whether they will be carried.

Dr. Fox: We have a fair idea of the Government's position. I do not know whether it is appropriate—perhaps it is against the rules of the House—to offer the Leader of the House a wager. I shall wager £10 for her favourite charity that she ultimately forces her Back Benchers in precisely the opposite direction to that which they took when the Weatherill proposals were previously debated in this House.

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Sir Alan Haselhurst): Order. Perhaps it would be better if that wager were kept metaphorical.

Dr. Fox: I am not a gambling man, Mr. Deputy Speaker. I have never even been to a bookie.

Let me return to the point made by the hon. Member for Harlow (Mr. Rammell). The Conservative position has been clear throughout the debate. We saw no need for reform of the House of Lords. There was nothing about it in our manifesto. However, we have accepted that the Government are implementing the proposals in their manifesto and that the status quo is no longer an option. As the Leader of the House has pointed out, I have also said that the Conservative party will not reintroduce hereditary peers after we win the next general election. We must therefore consider ways of introducing an independent element into the upper House.

I commend the Mackay report to Labour Members who have not read it. It is an elegant and extraordinarily interesting discourse that takes the debate on House of Lords reform to levels never achieved by the Government. It proposes two models. It is not a question of an entirely elected or an entirely appointed House. One of the Mackay options is a partly elected House. Members could be elected in many different ways. Another option is to move to an almost fully elected House with a proportion of Members appointed by the Executive so that Ministers could work in the upper House. It is an interesting document and we will consult on it in the Conservative party to find how our party thinks reform should be taken forward.

I hope that the hon. Member for Harlow will give us credit for having moved the debate much further than have the Government. The contributions in print of several of my hon. Friends have added much to the debate on the House of Lords on both sides of the argument. I am genuinely sorry that the Government were not more willing to outline some of the options that the Labour party, if not the Government, might consider for stage 2 reform.

The Government's contribution has been extraordinarily sterile. They have proposed a change with no idea of how to carry it through. They have muddled along. They do not know how they want our constitutional framework to look and have little idea of what the Executive's relationship with people or Parliament should be beyond having more power centralised and more power given to political parties for the Prime Minister to exercise greater control through those organs.

I hope that this debate marks the beginning of the House of Commons re-establishing a little of its self-respect. In the wider process of reform, let us remember that our primary duty is the scrutiny and production of legislation and the provision of a framework for what we are meant to do: to govern wisely and well those whom we are elected to represent.

4.37 pm

Mr. Robert Sheldon (Ashton–under–Lyne): I agree with one aspect of what the hon. Member for Woodspring (Dr. Fox) said. On the proper use of Back Benchers, there is a need for the alternative career structure that he mentioned. The Select Committee that I have the privilege to chair, the Liaison Committee, is considering that. It is examining what changes should be suggested halfway through a Parliament for the future role of Select Committees and considering how they can carry out their investigative role, which cannot easily be reproduced in any other forum. They can question the people responsible for important decisions and come back at them again and again. They can seek memorandums and have the power to call for whatever persons, papers or records we require. Something is happening on that and I await the results in due course.

Dr. Fox: The right hon. Gentleman has much more experience than most hon. Members. Is he saying that he believes that the House does not have sufficient scrutiny powers to control an Executive who seem increasingly capable of legislating by Executive action through secondary legislation?

Mr. Sheldon: My view is that the Select Committees are doing very well. They were set up two years ago and this is a suitable time to consider whether there can or should be changes to make them even more effective. That is what is being done through our consultations.

My right hon. Friend the Leader of the House opened this debate in a way that wholly commended itself to me and many others when she said that she is a House of Commons woman through and through. That is what the Leader of the House should be and I welcome that assertion. Of course, I knew it already, but it is nice to hear it once again. My right hon. Friend also mentioned that the powers of the House of Lords are great—far too great in the opinion of many Labour Members. The only limit on the activities of Members of the House of Lords is the way in which they exercise those powers. My right hon. Friend was right to draw attention to that point.

My view of the proposed legislation, as it comes back from the House of Lords, is that it would produce a transitional House; these are the first steps. My expectation is that that temporary scheme is likely to become permanent. I am sorry to disagree with some of my colleagues, but, as time goes on, the enthusiasm for constitutional reform is not likely to increase. In my experience—I have seen a fair amount of such matters in my time—that enthusiasm is likely to terminate fairly early on.

Lord Cranborne showed himself to be a most powerful and inventive person. Given the way in which he carried out his work, he is obviously the lost leader of the Tories in this generation. He knew that, as Sir John Harington put it in the 16th century:

> "Treason doth never prosper, what's the reason?
> For if it prosper, none dare call it treason."

That is the point. The noble Lord's work will almost surely prosper. We may reach agreement on losing the hereditaries, save for the 90 or 92, whatever the number is, but further moves to abolish them are likely to die through the difficulties of constitution making, where there are as many solutions as there are Members of Parliament. The likelihood is that after the noble Lord's work, which he carried out to the annoyance—even the anger—of Members on the Opposition Front Bench, he could see that there was a cause worth fighting for. If he could not save all the hereditaries, he was going to save a substantial number of them.

There will be slippage. As was mentioned earlier, the second stage is likely to continue well beyond December. The matter is unlikely to be resolved in this Parliament—possibly not even in the next one. As colleagues have pointed out, we should not try to remedy the defects of the House of Commons by making changes in the House of Lords. The House of Lords should remedy not the

[Mr. Sheldon]

deficiencies that we see at present, but those that might be regarded as more permanent. If there are defects in this House, they need to be put right before we grant the House of Lords more powers to remedy those problems.

Mr. Hogg: What if the defects in this House are not essentially procedural, but stem from the fact that we do not have a separation of powers and that the Executive are Members of this place? Because the Executive, through the Whips Office, can control the majority party, this House is incapable of exercising proper control of the Executive. That is not procedure; it stems from an inherent characteristic of the constitutional settlement that is in place.

Mr. Sheldon: That has been the position for the past 250 years. It was a wonderful solution, because, as long as Members of Parliament had feelings of independence, they could form part of the Executive as well as holding the Executive to account. When we considered the problems in the United States, we used to congratulate ourselves on how well we had organised matters. What has happened during the past 30 years is that Members of Parliament have become much more full time and are looking to a career structure. It is that career structure that has tended to corrupt the system. That is the problem.

Mr. Andrew Rowe (Faversham and Mid-Kent): The right hon. Gentleman has made half the point that I was about to make. Is it not true that Members of Parliament were much more independent when they were of independent means?

Mr. Sheldon: Now, we have large numbers of Members of Parliament who have little in the way of outside interests and outside concerns. As a result, they look to the ordinary routes of promotion and envisage themselves forming part of the Government. In the past, many Members of substance and standing would come into the Chamber to listen to the debate; now, most Members come to the Chamber to speak in a debate. There is nothing wrong in that, but we should recognise that there was formerly an element that produced the sort of House of Commons that it was our privilege to inherit, but which we have, to a certain extent, distorted. That is the real problem.

We have been at this stage before in respect of House of Lords reform. I strongly opposed the proposals in 1968–69. At that time, there was an agreement between the two Front-Bench teams, but it was my good fortune and privilege to spot, right from the start, that there was a way to divide them in such a way as to ensure that they could never get the guillotine. By using one device or another, the opponents of the proposals ensured that that happened. The Government Back Benchers railed against Ministers and the Opposition Back Benchers railed against their Front Benchers, with the result that the legislation fell.

I could see that the legislation could not be revived, because a poll produced at the time showed that there was little support for the proposals. The House sat 14 days and nights—at that time, we had the Dick Crossman reforms, so we sat morning, afternoon, evening and night—but after those 14 days, we had reached only clause 6 of a 20-clause Bill, so the Bill was dropped.

The deficiencies in that legislation were far greater than the deficiencies in the current Bill. At least in the current Bill, we can see the first stage and what will happen during that period, whereas the 1968–69 legislation simply gave huge powers of patronage to two Front-Bench teams operating together. If it had been passed, not only would it have distorted the House of Lords, but, more important, it would have distorted the House of Commons by creating an aldermanic bench.

I have had some experience of an aldermanic bench. People who have been elected as councillors wait for a certain number of their colleagues to die off so that they can acquire a position in which they will never have to face another election. It is a tempting prospect: permanent positions that carry power, but no responsibility—lovely. I could foresee the result of the 1968 proposals: some Members of Parliament would have been anxious to obtain one of those aldermanic posts, so there would have been patronage in this place, because Front Benchers would have been able to offer an attractive combination of power with security and pay. We must concern ourselves with both powers and composition, even at the first stage.

Mr. Andrew Tyrie (Chichester): The right hon. Gentleman has thoroughly described the shortcomings of the 1968 proposals. Does he take issue with the Labour party submission which states:

"There is a great deal of wisdom in these earlier proposals for House of Lords reform which would repay careful examination today"?

Mr. Sheldon: Given that I spent a great deal of my political life fighting such proposals, I am not likely to change my mind 30 years on. Those proposals were flawed. At the time they were debated, the House could not get the guillotine—it could not even get 100 Members to move the closure; it got only 99, and that was the end of that.

The whole point is that Back Benchers have been underappreciated. Back Benchers are not always wrong, even on the big issues. In my time, we have had devaluation, which should have occurred far sooner; we have had the east of Suez policy, when the Government said that this country's frontiers were on the Himalayas, which was a load of nonsense and I fought against it; we have had the poll tax, against which we should have fought harder. On those and many other issues, Back Benchers knew better than the Government of the day, but the House of Commons failed to turn that general feeling into decision making. It was not the House of Commons or the system that was weak; it was the individuals who failed to put right what was wrong.

What needs to be done? We must consider the scrutiny of legislation by the House of Commons, which is the backbone of its work. We perform two types of examination of legislation—one is examination to see whether it is efficient, economic and effective. That is the Public Accounts Committee work of ensuring that everything that is done is done in the best possible way. The other role concerns aspects of policy, and the role of Government Back Benchers is even more important when the Government have a large majority. Francis Pym, who lost his position for his pains, was right to point out the dangers of large majorities. I welcome the Labour party being in power, but we must be careful that we understand

the difficulties of a large majority and find a role for Members of Parliament so that they can use their abilities to the full.

What is the solution? We must use the House of Commons more effectively, as both a debating and a decision-making body. Some in the Government have always believed that, in the interests of party unity, different views should not be openly expressed, but should be conveyed quietly to the relevant Ministers for their reconsideration. With many Ministers that is an effective way to achieve change, as we have seen in the past day or so. What if it does not work? Should the alternative views not be put? Should Members of Parliament have to bite their lip, swallow their pride, grumble in private and await the next means of persuasion? That is not the way for a sovereign House of Commons to proceed. This is a national forum for debate and open discussion, and for argument that brings out issues openly for the people to see and decide. Anyone who believes in open government and open dissent must be a part of that.

Are Governments always right? Of course they are not. The question is whether we should exchange the pressure of Members of Parliament for pressure from the unelected peers in the House of Lords. Of course not. I have always believed in the need to maximise one's powers of persuasion. An opponent of a Government can find his or her views readily dismissed, but Government Back Benchers can have an enormous influence if they make use of their voice sensibly, moderately and sustainedly. The task of a Government Back Bencher is not to be considered outside the pale but to have it believed—including by the Whips—that one is redeemable and interested in looking for good solutions.

Mr. Gordon Prentice (Pendle): What should the loyal Government Back Bencher do if they find themselves totally opposed to the Government's proposals, say, for example, on whether the upper House should be directly elected?

Mr. Sheldon: I can only answer from my own experience. I was against the Government on devaluation and on the east of Suez policy. At the time of devaluation, I was the chairman of the economic and finance group. I spoke in the House in favour of devaluation, and nine other members of the economic and finance group of the parliamentary Labour party spoke in my support on devaluation, but there was nobody in the Press Gallery and it was never reported. It was all in *Hansard*, but not in the papers. The House of Commons must return to being the centre of debate and argument to convince the people what is right and what should be done.

Government Back Benchers should put the arguments sensibly and clearly. If they get the debate going, they may persuade their colleagues and the Government of the need for a change. Nothing is fixed irredeemably. However, one should make one's point with courtesy and persistence.

In the 1969 debates on House of Lords reform, I was concerned the proposals would make the position of Members of the House of Lords more attractive. It would have given them powers as well as salaries. I considered the revising powers of the House of Lords and I was impressed by the arguments of Professor Griffiths who showed that nearly all the substantive amendments in the Lords were the result of Government actions.

I accept that the position has changed in the past 30 years. Government legislation is now more hurried and requires more amendments. Nevertheless, the fault for defective legislation lies with the House of Commons. Legislation is defective not because it has not been examined properly in the House of Lords but because the 659 Members in this place have not highlighted the flaws. That is a problem of application and of principle.

The only legislation that requires amendment from an outside body is the quinquennial Act. We clearly cannot change that Act ourselves: we cannot legislate to continue as Members of Parliament without calling a general election. I am also concerned about the domination of this Chamber by the Executive. Reference has been made to that problem, which has existed for 30 or 40 years—although it was not such a powerful obstacle when I was first elected to this place. Today, almost all Members of Parliament are full-time Members and they want a career structure. That leads to dominance first by the Executive and then by central party organisations. That is a serious matter.

I was not expected to be chosen to contest my seat of Ashton-under-Lyne: it was purely accidental. I only went along for the ride. I never expected to be a Member of Parliament—it was just one of those strange things that happens. I am not sure that that sort of thing will occur again—although there are many people in a similar position. We should have Members of Parliament from different backgrounds. A central party organisation produces clones too readily, and we do not want that in this place. Members of Parliament should have diverse views and characteristics.

Faced with those problems, people look to the second Chamber to provide solutions. However, the second Chamber can also be influenced by the Executive. The Executive have the power and may find themselves forced to exert in the other place the control that they wield in the House of Commons.

Mr. David Heath (Somerton and Frome): The right hon. Gentleman is talking about the powers of the Executive in this and in another place. Does he believe that the Executive should be represented in the other Chamber if it is to carry out its legislative scrutiny role properly? Why should the Executive be represented in another place?

Mr. Sheldon: We look forward to seeing the royal commission's report. I do not see how those serving on a royal commission can agree about an issue such as this. If I were to put the people I know on a royal commission panel, I would assemble as many views as there were commission members. It will be interesting to see how the royal commission will come to some agreement and whether its members will be prepared to compromise their views.

The major question is how to ensure that hon. Members have the reasonable level of independence necessary to secure good legislation and an active debate that represents the views in the country and focuses the nation on the issues that concern it most. In this connection, the only alternative to the dogfight between two sides of the House—which is necessary, but not sufficient—is the role of Government Back Benchers.

There will be no satisfactory solution so long as the House of Commons does not fulfil its traditional role, which has existed at least since the Reform Act of 1832.

[Mr. Sheldon]

If it fulfils that role, the House of Lords will be less important and a new system may be devised more readily. The message is that the House of Commons must fulfil its function and then look to the House of Lords to fill in the far fewer gaps in our constitution.

4.59 pm

Mr. John MacGregor (South Norfolk): I shall begin by making two comments on points made by my hon. Friend the Member for Woodspring (Dr. Fox). They are points that I have made in the past, but they are worth repeating in any debate on the House of Lords.

First, I agree with all the criticism of the Government for proceeding with phase 1 without knowing what phase 2 will be. They have put the cart before the horse. It is clear that the Government gave no thought beforehand to the long-term consequences of their proposals. The speech by the Leader of the House made that particularly clear, because she dodged all the issues of what phase 2 might consist of, and resorted to leaving that question to the royal commission and then to the Joint Committee and the House. That is a fundamental criticism of the Government.

Secondly, I agree also with the right hon. Member for Ashton-under-Lyne (Mr. Sheldon). I suspect that we shall be stuck with phase 1 for a long time, partly because of the run-up to the next election and the processes that must be gone through, and partly, as the right hon. Gentleman said, because of the difficulties of reaching any agreement, not least in the royal commission, and in the House, about what a long-term phase 2 should be. I believe that the House of Lords as it will be constituted under the House of Lords Bill will be in place for a very long time, which I find deeply unsatisfactory.

I was not sure how the right hon. Gentleman would conclude his speech, because he spent most of his time talking about the House of Commons, rather than the House of Lords. I suspected that he would say, as he did, that, if the Commons reformed itself correctly in a number of the ways that he outlined, it would not matter too much what the House of Lords was like because it would not have many functions. I do not share his optimism—if there is optimism, which I doubt—that the Commons will be able to address some of the points that he made. It is therefore important to consider the composition and powers of the second Chamber.

Mr. Dominic Grieve (Beaconsfield): Does my right hon. Friend agree that nothing would provide a greater incentive for reform of the House of Commons than the reformed House of Lords doing its job correctly?

Mr. MacGregor: I agree, and I shall return to that point later.

The right hon. Member for Ashton-under-Lyne referred to the increasing dangers of the power of the Executive over the legislature and the centralisation of powers. If we leave in place a weakened House of Lords, which I suspect we shall have, and an unreformed House of Commons, which we shall probably have also, the power of the Executive will continue to increase. That is why we need to consider a stronger House of Lords and, perhaps, a reformed House of Commons. However, a reformed Commons will not, on its own, be sufficient.

Mr. Tyrie: Does my right hon. Friend think that the likelihood of Commons reform would be greatly enhanced if the Lords were given moral authority and powers? That would stimulate this place into reforming itself.

Mr. MacGregor: It might, and I just agreed with my hon. Friend the Member for Beaconsfield (Mr. Grieve) on that very point. It is much more likely that the Commons will reform itself if we have a House of Lords that is different from that envisaged in the Bill going through Parliament at present.

Having made two points that have frequently been made and with which I strongly agree, I turn now to the future and the royal commission and its report. Lord Wakeham's royal commission began in an excellent manner. I have read the consultation paper several times, and it raises most of the big issues, only a few of which I shall have time to refer to today. I am encouraged by the fact that it has not assumed certain points, particularly those relating to powers, but is raising all the fundamental issues relating to powers as well as composition. I shall comment on the criteria, the powers and the composition.

On the criteria, I absolutely share the position of the Leader of the House and agree with her about the pre-eminence of the House of Commons. I am an out-and-out House of Commons man, and the only difference on that point between me and the right hon. Lady is one of sex. I shall comment on one criterion that is included in the consultation paper and one that is not. The first, which I want particularly to single out, is the importance of the second Chamber complementing, rather than duplicating, this Chamber.

Mrs. Beckett *indicated assent.*

Mr. MacGregor: That criterion leads to a number of conclusions, and although the Leader of the House nodded on that point, I thought that her remarks about powers demonstrated that she has a closed mind about the second Chamber complementing the Commons. If she takes that point seriously, it will lead her to consider more powers for the House of Lords.

On page 6 of the White Paper, the Government say that "the second chamber must have a distinctive role",

and on page 7 they refer to a "fundamental transformation" of the constitutional processes, including the way in which the House of Lords is reformed. The complementary nature is a key criterion, and will underline everything that I shall say about powers and composition.

A criterion that is not listed, but which is very important, is that the second Chamber must attract high-calibre people who have a wide range of experience and expertise. I agree with the Leader of the House on this; she mentioned the issue, but did not follow it through. If we are honest, perhaps too much of the House of Lords is in the nature of what my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Rushcliffe (Mr. Clarke) described in a recent article in the *Evening Standard* as:

> "A pleasant club and a debating chamber made up of people who are reluctant to retire from public life but don't want to go through the process of election any more."

That is something of a caricature, although there is an element of truth in it. It does not lead me to the same conclusion as that drawn by my right hon. and learned Friend, which was that the second Chamber should be wholly elected—I shall come to that—but it is an important point in considering what we want the House of Lords to do.

Attracting high-calibre people who have a wide range of experience and expertise is fundamental. We need to do so if we are to have a stronger Chamber than now—and one that is respected. As the right hon. Member for Ashton-under-Lyne said, it is becoming more and more difficult for this House to attract people in the middle of, or slightly later on in, their careers, who have considerable experience and expertise from a range of walks of life. This House—I regret this—is therefore composed more and more of people who are full-time politicians, from the time they leave their educational experiences to their retirement from this Chamber. In other words, we are increasingly politician-dominated.

People with outside careers, who in the past have entered the House in their late 30s and contributed a great deal, must now choose between that outside career and a much lower salary and—frankly—poorer pensions. That is partly because we make it more difficult for people to have outside interests, but mainly because if people lose their seats in their late 40s or early 50s, they find it extremely difficult, given the nature of the world of work today, to pick up the threads, have anything like an attractive career in the run-up to their retirement and secure a reasonable pension.

I speak with some feeling on the matter because, as chairman of the House of Commons trustees pension fund, I see acute cases among ex-colleagues who have lost their seats in their late 40s and early 50s. People outside the House are aware of that, and, as a result, do not want to enter it. The House of Lords could assist in bringing in such outside experience, thus complementing and supplementing this place.

We will not fulfil either key criteria unless we recognise the need to tackle the question of powers. If the reform is to be proper, thorough and long term—that ought to be the Government's aim—the second Chamber must make a contribution to the political life of the nation that is noticed and respected. The media must take notice of it, and the establishment, the Government and the civil service must take it into account. It must also affect decisions—that means changing as well as influencing Government policy.

I accept that one of the weaknesses of the strong hereditary composition of the House of Lords was that, in practice, it constrained that body in its exercise of such functions. Therefore, even when it had such powers, it did not exercise them very fully. If I am honest, speaking as a former Minister with 15 years' experience in government, I also know that, quite often, the belief that the House of Lords has a powerful influence over policy and the practice are two different things. Therefore, it is important to strengthen the House of Lords in that regard. If the House of Lords is to act as a better second-Chamber check on the Executive than it does now, it must have strengthened powers. I hope that I have shown that I believe that it is crucial to tackle the question of powers first, and composition second.

I was critical of the White Paper because it gave much more attention to composition than to powers. In fact, at some points, it talks of weakening the powers of a second Chamber. Indeed, I was a little concerned that the Leader of the House was going down that route today when she said that she did not believe that the House of Lords should have more powers than it has at present. I am very glad that the royal commission is not approaching its task in that way.

If I were at all critical of the excellent report from Lord Mackay and his colleagues—it was instituted by the Conservative party, and is an excellent contribution to the debate; it has certainly moved the arguments on considerably—I would say only that it tended to take the view that the powers of the House of Lords should be left as they are and should evolve organically, rather than being tackled now. I believe that there will not be a third chance to consider the powers of the other place. Indeed, today we have already argued that there is a danger that there will not be a second opportunity to do so. It is therefore important to consider the matter of powers now.

What should the powers be? Moreover, how will the powers be used, and will they be used?

Mr. Maclennan: Before the right hon. Gentleman deals with those matters, will he perhaps lend support to his argument by instancing examples, drawn from his long 15-year experience of government, of when the Government might have been assisted by the House of Lords exercising powers, and when he believes that, ultimately, amendments for the better would consequently have been made? Will he give some examples? An admission that Governments have got it wrong is very rare in this Chamber.

Mr. MacGregor: I shall list four issues related to powers additional to those already held by the House of Lords, and, in doing so, I should answer the right hon. Gentleman's question. All the issues arise from my own feelings and experience in government.

Secondary legislation is the first issue. I am delighted that, in its submission to the royal commission, the Conservative party has highlighted the importance of strengthening both Houses—although, in this debate, we are talking only about the House of Lords—in their handling of secondary legislation. I am delighted also that, in one of its questions, the royal commission asked about

"providing for the Second Chamber's opposition to any subordinate legislation to result in delay and reconsideration (by the Commons), rather than rejection."

I think that the way in which Parliament as a whole deals with secondary legislation is now a disgrace. The situation has become very much worse because of the habit of all Governments, but very much of the current one, of addressing so many key issues in secondary legislation because they do not have the time or do not wish to think through the consequences in primary legislation. As the practice has become so much more intensively practised, it has become much more important to answer the question of how this Chamber and the other Chamber should handle secondary legislation.

Mr. Letwin: Does my right hon. Friend agree that the prevalence of so-called Henry VIII clauses, in which secondary legislation is permitted to amend or revoke primary legislation, has almost got to the stage of turning the tables by making secondary primary, and primary secondary?

Mr. MacGregor: That is not always the case, of course, but very often it is. It must be a subject of great

[Mr. MacGregor]

concern for all of us, as it has greatly strengthened the Executive's powers and made almost non-existent the legislature's powers of scrutinising.

As we all know, this House is able either to reject in toto or to accept in toto secondary legislation—statutory instruments—but cannot amend it. In Committee, when one is under pressure on a particular aspect of a Bill referring a matter to secondary legislation, the big concession that one makes—I have been guilty of it—is to agree that it is important, and therefore to agree that it should be dealt with by affirmative rather than by negative resolution. Big deal. When a Government have the majority that the current Government do, affirmative resolution does not amount to a row of beans. Therefore, there is no opportunity for either this House or the other House, which has a convention on secondary legislation, properly to scrutinise secondary legislation. There is no opportunity for this House to examine and amend in detail those crucial pieces of secondary legislation.

Mr. Grieve: I ask this as someone serving on the Joint Committee on Statutory Instruments. Does my right hon. Friend agree that it is most extraordinary that, even when scrutiny—which is limited to identifying whether legislation has been properly drafted—reveals that legislation is defective and deficient, it is still open to the Government to decide, as they very frequently do, to continue with the statutory instrument in that form, with the mere assurance that, at some later date, it will be corrected?

Mr. MacGregor: I agree. The practice underlines just how few powers of scrutiny the House now has over secondary legislation. I am sure that my hon. Friend will agree that much worse than the example he gave is when there are real criticisms of one policy aspect of the secondary legislation, but hon. Members are asked to accept the whole thing or nothing at all. As I said, with the current Government's majority, it is well known that that entails accepting the whole legislation.

Mrs. Beckett: I do not particularly want to make a partisan point, and agree with much of what the right hon. Gentleman has said—perhaps more than he has recognised. However, the notion that the practice has been introduced by the Government and is a consequence of our majority—*[Interruption.]* It is not a consequence of our majority. The practice has been growing over very many years, and I think that we all recognise that it has defects. Although I understand the astonishment of the hon. Member for Beaconsfield (Mr. Grieve) to hear the Government saying, "Yes, this is defective, but we will come back to it at some other time", I assure him that, to my knowledge, the practice has been going on for at least 15 years.

Mr. MacGregor: I thought that I had already said that all Governments have done it. However, I also said that the practice is worse now, primarily because there is increasingly a tendency to put legislation into secondary form, but also because of the Government's large majority.

Mr. Hogg: I must ask my right hon. Friend whether there is not a further dimension to the matter. Secondary legislation is the vehicle for expressing in statutory language decisions applicable to the United Kingdom and emanating from the European Union, either in directives or in regulations. In respect to a whole body of that, there is—

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. I am sorry to interrupt the right hon. and learned Gentleman, but I am sure that he knows that he should be addressing the occupant of the Chair.

Mr. Hogg: I am sorry, Mr. Deputy Speaker.

In that respect, no mechanism is available to us, either in this place or in the other place, to address the merits of that legislation.

Mr. MacGregor: That was going to be my second point. I should first finish dealing with secondary domestic legislation.

Mr. Mark Fisher (Stoke-on-Trent, Central) *rose—*

Mr. MacGregor: I hope that hon. Members will forgive me for not giving way again for a while. There are things that I want to say on composition. I do not want to speak for too long, and there have already been interventions in my speech.

I just want to underline the fact—I am glad that all the interventions, including that of the Leader of the House, have supported it—that we have to address the issue of how secondary legislation should be dealt with.

The House of Lords may have more time than we do to consider secondary legislation, and if the other place attracts people with outside experience and expertise, it may have a greater ability to consider secondary legislation. I therefore believe that the House of Lords has a particularly important role in dealing with secondary legislation. It should be given powers to amend it, and certainly to delay it, to give Governments time to think again.

The second issue relating to powers that I should like to raise—European legislation—was just mentioned briefly by my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Sleaford and North Hykeham (Mr. Hogg). To be very brief, I shall simply say that we have, of course, developed mechanisms for scrutinising European legislation. This House's mechanisms for scrutinising such legislation are fairly extensive, and are probably more extensive than those of other democratic institutions in the European Union. Nevertheless, I think that there are matters on which we could go further and in which the House of Lords could have a specific role to play.

The role of the House of Lords should include consideration of issues that will be decided in the Council of Ministers and in European legislation, but well before those decisions are taken. I stress the importance of consideration well before the decisions are taken. In my experience—as a former Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food, and as a former Secretary of State for Transport—the House of Commons far too often debates issues that are almost already settled in a negotiating framework in Brussels. Anyone who has experience of how the Brussels system works will know that to be true.

In one sense, therefore, there are limitations to what the House of Lords could do on European legislation before final decisions on that legislation are taken, not only for

the reason that I have given—which could be dealt with by considering the issues very early—but because every Minister has to engage in negotiation with other Ministers and cannot himself or herself entirely achieve the wishes of this Chamber or the other Chamber.

The House of Lords could also play a much bigger part in the implementation of European legislation. As we all know, it is a common cry that the United Kingdom tends to implement legislation much more extremely and thoroughly than other member states do. Clearly, there is a role not only for the second Chamber but for this Chamber in ensuring that we do not burden ourselves with consequential legislation that goes way beyond what is needed. The second Chamber should also have a role in subsequently examining how European legislation has worked. The other place should have powers in performing that important role.

My third point is that more use should be made of the revising power of the second Chamber. Two years' breathing space on legislation may well be desirable. I do not often agree with Earl Russell, but I agree with what he wrote recently in *The Sunday Telegraph* about the House of Lords:

> "It is only because we have the power to vote that the Commons ever listens to anything we say. Only if the functions of the reformed House include the right to revise legislation, against the wishes of the Commons, will it be worth bothering with."

There is a grain of truth in that. The revising powers need to be looked at.

My fourth suggestion relates to the Select Committees of the second Chamber, which do a splendid job and have a substantial reputation. They are one of the second Chamber's current strengths, particularly because they enable unelected people who have spent a long time in other careers to bring their experience to bear. They are highly regarded, but I wonder how much influence their reports have. They are read by the experts and civil servants, but I must admit that they are not always the first documents that a Minister reads when dealing with policy issues in this place.

We could strengthen the powers of the Committees by building on the excellent work of the Joint Committee on the Financial Services and Markets Bill, with reports to inform both Chambers. Pre-legislative Select Committees in the House of Lords, given the composition that I hope for, could have a substantial role. I hope that that answers the right hon. Member for Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross (Mr. Maclennan) by showing some areas in which the powers could be extended.

Mr. Peter Brooke (Cities of London and Westminster): I shall be brief. Having given evidence as a Minister to Lords Committees, does my right hon. Friend agree that it is potentially the most frightening experience that a Minister can have?

Mr. MacGregor: I must have been lucky, because I do not recall that being the case. I certainly found the Committees stimulating and prepared heavily for them, as Ministers do for anything in this Chamber. However, if that was my right hon. Friend's experience, it strengthens my view that the Committees add to the ability of the second Chamber to contribute by dealing with pre-legislative issues.

I am doubtful about the concept of a wholly directly elected second Chamber. First, it would duplicate this Chamber. Secondly, as the White Paper pointed out, it would be a recipe for conflict. The endless tensions are one reason why this Chamber would never agree to it. Unfortunately, such a Chamber would divide too often on purely party lines, duplicating what happens here. Thirdly, the second Chamber would expect a real and different role. If it did not get one, those who stood for election to it would, if they will forgive me, be the failed candidates for membership of this House, regarding it as a stepping stone towards their hope of coming here. Such a Chamber would not be a step forward. If it did not have powers, it would not attract people with a wide range of experience and careers to its wholly elected posts. It would certainly not be independent—that is an important element that many people have referred to—even under the ingenious Mackay proposals whereby Members would be elected for 15 years in total, with one third being elected every five years. That would remove some of the conflict and duplication, but it would not address my criticisms.

Those criticisms do not apply so much to a partly elected Chamber, but there are still difficulties that would need to be thought through, including the proportions and the possibility of there being two classes of Member. I do not have the same overall objections to a partly elected second Chamber.

The greatest merit lies in a mix of indirectly elected and nominated members. I stress the need for indirect election. I share the views of those who think that a Chamber that was wholly appointed, either by the Prime Minister or by his appointees, would be most undesirable. There are two advantages in Members being indirectly elected—independence and expertise. In his consultation paper, Lord Wakeham refers to the case for some Members to be active in other walks of life. I would go further than that: there is a strong case for a lot of Members to be active in other walks of life.

Mr. Hogg: And in this place.

Mr. MacGregor: As there should be in this place, but, alas, for reasons that we have discussed, that is too often not the case these days.

The bodies that would be involved in the process of indirect election are a matter for debate, and I shall not waste time on that now, but there are obvious professions, including the Church and the law, that could contribute to the indirectly elected element.

Mr. Eric Forth (Bromley and Chislehurst): Does my right hon. Friend accept that if we lay too much emphasis on people who are active in other walks of life, they may not pay much attention to their duties in the second Chamber, which would diminish the ability of that Chamber to provide effective scrutiny of what the Government are doing?

Mr. MacGregor: I was coming to that. With a mix of indirectly elected, partly elected and nominated Members, there would be a considerable number of Members who could fulfil more of a full-time role. If we want to attract people with wide experience who have a lot to give to the process of legislation and debate, we have to accept that some of them can be there only part-time.

Mr. Tyrie: My right hon. Friend has argued for increased powers for the House of Lords so that it has the

[Mr. Tyrie]

ability to challenge the Executive and call it to account. Does he believe that a mish-mash House could have the necessary moral authority to challenge the authority of an Executive elected on a huge Commons mandate?

Mr. MacGregor: I have already said that there are grave difficulties with a wholly elected Chamber. It would duplicate the work of this Chamber. I do not accept that the only people with any moral authority are those who have been directly elected.

I have already said that Church representatives are important. I would remove the judicial role from the House of Lords and have it purely as a legislative and policy advisory Chamber, but I accept that there would need to be a substantial mix of lawyers in the indirectly elected element, because their expertise would be valuable, particularly in the scrutiny of secondary legislation. The proposals that I have outlined would provide the best mix of a second Chamber that complemented this one and attracted good people.

I cannot see the justification for the proposals regarding representatives of the devolved bodies in Scotland and Wales and the European Parliament. The proposals would duplicate the work that those Members should be doing in their own bodies. Regional interests are well represented in this House, and we should beware of excessive duplication and layers of government. The devolved bodies need to bed down first.

The proposals also raise the question of how the English regions would be represented. Representatives from regional assemblies would not be the way forward. Most of all, the proposals are wrong in principle, because there is no purpose in having a second Chamber composed of people from other elected Chambers. Absurdly, some elected representatives from this place would have to sit in the other place to represent England, complementing those from the Scottish Parliament. The case has not been made.

My right hon. Friend the Member for Bromley and Chislehurst (Mr. Forth) said that people from other walks of life might be only part-time members. Some life peers, including former colleagues from this place and some noted industrialists, hardly ever participate in the work of the House of Lords. The same is true of some hereditary peers. That has to be addressed. Members of the other place must agree to give a certain proportion of their time to the work of that place. I agree with the Mackay commission that some salary and allowance for secretarial and other help must be given, although I do not agree with the proposal that the allowances should be the same as those in this place.

I believe that this issue poses a great challenge to the House of Commons and particularly to the Government and the Government Whips. If the process is to be more than simply a device to pander to certain left-wing prejudices and get rid of the hereditary element, and is to be a genuine reform with a real purpose to improve our constitutional system and the control over the Executive, involving some of the most experienced and knowledgeable in our nation, the Government must face up to that and accept that it will mean real powers and real changes in the second Chamber. If that is not the case, we will have a House of Lords that is not much different from now, except that the independent hereditary element will be displaced by appointed cronyism and even more concentration of power. That would be a hugely backward step, and I share the fear of the right hon. Member for Ashton-under-Lyne that that might happen. I must tell the Leader of the House that the Government will be judged on their response.

5.31 pm

Mr. Peter Temple-Morris (Leominster): It is a pleasure to follow the right hon. Member for South Norfolk (Mr. MacGregor). I am pleased to tell him that I agree with the vast majority of what he said. The spirit of his speech and its bipartisan nature—that applies also to the speech of my right hon. Friend the Member for Ashton-under-Lyne (Mr. Sheldon)—is necessary in what is essentially a consultative debate. This is the House's road to Lord Wakeham. Doubtless his commission will take heavy note of what we say across the Floor of the House. The right hon. Member for South Norfolk concentrated on powers, but he had quite a bit to say on composition. I hope to complement him by saying a little more on composition. He will hear echoes of his speech in what I say, and I hope that I can advance some of his arguments.

Let me dispose of one point immediately by saying that House of Commons reform is relevant to whatever upper House we have ultimately. As other hon. Members have remarked, House of Commons reform is notoriously difficult to bring about. I am pessimistic about it in the shorter term, but optimistic in the longer term. The Modernisation Committee, which is a noble effort to improve matters, does not move with the speed of an Olympic 100 m sprinter, to put it mildly. Reform will take time. However, I agree with the hon. Member for Beaconsfield (Mr. Grieve) that if we create a reformed upper House, which will inevitably come, it will be a great spur to the House of Commons to speed up its reforms.

In reverse order to the right hon. Member for South Norfolk, I will deal first with composition and then deal with functions and powers.

Mr. Letwin: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Temple-Morris: I want to make some progress. The hon. Gentleman has made a number of interventions; I will give way later.

I want to state how I see the upper House, and I shall begin with what we do not want. I agree with the right hon. Member for South Norfolk that we do not want an all-elected Chamber. It would inevitably challenge the House of Commons and its method of election could make it almost an embarrassment to this place. There have been suggestions that it should be elected, in whole or in part, under proportional representation. We must bear in mind the electoral system that prevails for this place and which results in its various characteristics, such as, for example, the lack of Conservatives in entire tracts of the country. Under proportional representation, the Conservatives have now become represented again, but there would immediately be a clash. We cannot get round that, even with some fancy system of staggered long terms, because there would still be a claim that they should be more representative at any given moment. Please, no all-elected Chamber.

We do not want an all-appointed Chamber. Anyone who looks at matters in a somewhat old-fashioned way might see certain attractions in the power of patronage and appointment. It might be seen as an admirable concept under which there could be a great variety of people. However, the public perception, which is all important, is that it would be cronyism gone mad. It would have no legitimacy; the Canadian Senate is a good example. That goes out.

What do we want? There are some interesting guidelines in the admirable White Paper, which is a fair document. Page 6, paragraph 6 states:

"But the second chamber must have a distinctive role and must neither usurp, nor threaten, the supremacy of the first chamber."

That point was raised by my right hon. Friend the Leader of the House. It is important that this Chamber remains supreme.

Page 6, paragraph 9 of the White Paper states:

"The most distinctive and important role of the present House of Lords is the specialist expertise and independent perspective it can bring to the scrutiny of legislation. But the House of Lords and the work it carries out suffer from its lack of legitimacy".

It then goes on to deal with the House of Lords as at present constituted.

We need to strike a balance between the necessary expertise and legitimacy in the eyes of the public. It follows from those guidelines that we need a mixed Chamber, and I believe that, at the end of the debate, many hon. Members will favour that. The difficulty, as hon. Members agree, is to decide on what mix one has.

Let us look at some criteria for a mixed Chamber. It is essential that we should have the necessary expertise and a relatively independent collective attitude. The last thing we want is a copy of this place. We need part-timers with outside interests—they functioned here until comparatively recently. We must institute a system whereby they can continue to function because those whom we want to get in would not be interested in a Chamber that was any different from that. I welcome the White Paper's view that there should be no automatic party majority, which is very much part of the same point.

Mr. Andrew Rowe (Faversham and Mid-Kent): The hon. Gentleman says that it is self-evident that the Members should have the necessary expertise. Would he define what he means by "expertise" and tell us how they acquire it?

Mr. Temple-Morris: All will be revealed as my speech continues. That was a helpful intervention, but if I answered the hon. Gentleman now, I would lose the sequence of my speech. I hope that I will have dealt with it in some depth by the end of my speech.

We also need depth of representation to supplement this place. I am already beginning to answer the hon. Member for Faversham and Mid-Kent (Mr. Rowe) because, however we achieve that depth of representation, we need to deal with aspects such as occupation, region, gender, ethnic origin and so on.

I shall now deal with the mixed Chamber—part appointed and part elected, directly or indirectly.

Mr. Grieve: The hon. Gentleman has said that he is moving on to deal with a part-appointed and part-elected Chamber, by which he clearly accepts that part of the Chamber needs to be appointed. Might there be a possibility that the elected Members, who should be the vast majority, co-opt those who are not elected, thereby removing the power of patronage entirely and enhancing the legitimacy of the Chamber?

Mr. Temple-Morris: Much as I respect the interventions that the hon. Gentleman makes on my speeches, my answer is no, no, no. One has only to look at the Irish Senate and the political nature of the electorate there to realise that an admirable system can go wildly wrong. The last thing we want is for those who are elected, by whatever means, to reproduce themselves by way of appointment.

Mr. Grieve *rose—*

Mr. Temple-Morris: I will not give way again. I have not even answered the hon. Gentleman yet.

It is important that, to a certain extent, the power of patronage, well controlled by way of an independent appointments commission, stays with us in order to get the people we need who would not dream of coming forward under any other form of election.

The proportions within a mixed Chamber have been mentioned. It is important to remain flexible at this stage. On Second Reading, I talked about 70 per cent. being elected—the vast majority—and 30 per cent. being appointed, or one third being appointed, one third being elected and one third being functional constituencies, or colleges of interest as I called them. I am sorry to distress the hon. Member for Beaconsfield, but now I tend to go for more appointed Members. I would even go up to about 40 per cent. We need flexibility of appointment to get the right people in—I return to the point about expertise and independence of view, and the Cross-Bench element.

The period of appointment is directly relevant to the continuity of the House and its independence. It is a difficult subject which was touched on by the right hon. Member for South Norfolk. Particularly if we want younger people in, we have to consider the possibility of reappointment, but that limits independence. I have thought about the matter as, no doubt, have others, but, at the end of the day, rather than any particular term, appointment should be for life or the age of 75. We hope that all the Members have a happy and healthy retirement. I see that element of appointment as the foundation or the permanent feature of the new House of Lords.

I now turn to the elected part of the upper House. Touching again on a point raised by the right hon. Member for South Norfolk, direct election, whether it is regional or anything else, would produce the dreadful danger of party hacks. The upper Chamber would become a second division and, like the Irish Senate, to use an example that I know very well, in some ways it would be a waiting room for those who wanted to get down to this end of the building. In my view, direct elections should be avoided at all costs.

That leaves us with indirect elections, which need to avoid a political electorate. I referred briefly to that in reply to an intervention. The Irish Senate operates by way of functional constituencies. It is lovely on paper and it could work very well. Sometimes the system is criticised without the realisation that it is not the system, but the

[Mr. Temple-Morris]

electorate that is wrong. The electorate comprises the Members of the Dail and members of Irish local authorities, who form one of the most highly political electorates in the country, and the same would apply here.

There is nothing wrong with functional constituencies provided that we get the electorate right. In regard to the electorate, the answer is quite simple: they should elect themselves. The indirect system of election involves colleges of interest or functional constituencies. They could include representatives of the main areas of activity, such as business, the professions, trade unions and so on. The European Parliament could be a functional constituency, not in terms of electing its own Members, but it could elect a representative. The devolved Parliament and Assemblies of Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland could also be involved.

I entirely agree with the right hon. Member for South Norfolk that when Members of the European Parliament were first elected in 1974, many hon. Members standing said that there could be a dual mandate. If I remember rightly, after the first European election in 1979, only one solitary MEP remained a Member of Parliament after 1984.

Mr. Grieve: I am most grateful to the hon. Gentleman for giving way again. In the spirit of the debate, which is more a discussion, is there not a difficulty with the system of colleges of election? The Irish one began in the 1930s. Is it not the truth that it derived from a fascist form of government? I do not mean that pejoratively, but that was its origin: the idea of an estate of the realm made up of corporations. Is not the problem that the system typecasts people into categories, whereas all the evidence is that today's society is very fluid and that people are not typecast in that fashion?

Mr. Temple-Morris: I do not think that bringing fascism into the debate is particularly helpful. I do not find the Republic of Ireland a particularly fascist state. Having dealt with that rather extreme part of the hon. Gentleman's intervention, I should say that the election should be conducted democratically. There is no earthly reason why it should not be—I hope that the hon. Gentleman would agree that the Bar Council, for example, would be perfectly capable of putting people up to go to the upper House and electing such people at its annual meeting. Any professional, business or equivalent body in the country would have no difficulty in doing that. Such an election is a way to get in people in a representative capacity other than by appointing them by power of patronage, from wherever it comes. In addition, it would provide the opportunity for indirect election from regional councils in order to get regional representatives.

With regard to period of office, I do not think that there is anything wrong with having two different types of Members of the upper House. Appointed Members should be for life or until the age of 75. It is a matter for discussion, but a fair term of office for those indirectly elected by way of functional constituencies would be for the duration of a Parliament. Indeed, many of those representing such constituencies may not want to do so permanently; they may want to do a spell in Parliament.

Finally, I wish to make a few specific points about functions and powers. First, the Law Lords have been mentioned. As I said on Second Reading, I do not believe that the Law Lords belong to the legislature. Their presence is almost an accident of history; at one point, no one else had the skill to try such significant cases. They could quite easily continue as a supreme court of appeal, sitting in the Judicial Committee of the Privy Council, as they do today on certain matters. However, that is no bar to senior judges being nominated to the House of Lords. Inevitably, many of them will be and, no doubt, there will be plenty of lawyers in that Chamber.

Secondly, I know that there are constitutional complications in respect of the bishops, but I do not think that they belong in a modern legislature. That problem needs to be addressed. In some cases, they could be nominated. Indeed, the Churches could be functional constituencies. As a member of the Church of England, let me make the point that we need representatives of more Churches and faiths than just the Church of England by constitutional right.

Thirdly, the position of Ministers crept in by way of an intervention. I see no reason why Ministers need to be Members of the House of Lords. The concept of having Government spokesmen, as occurs in most other Parliaments of the democratic world, could easily apply to the Lords. Ministers should be firmly in the House of Commons. There seems to me no earthly reason why Ministers could not, where necessary, have a right of audience in the House of Lords. That occurs in many other democratic Parliaments.

The upper House should seriously consider allowing rights of audience or outside participation. The right way to deal with our devolved Parliaments and Assemblies is not to appoint their representatives there, although they may be colleges of interest, but to allow First Ministers, and so on, a right of audience in the upper House, if they so wish, in respect of crucial legislation. That occurs not only in the European Parliament, but in other Parliaments.

Finally, I wish to make an important general point with regard to powers. We have to get it right as it is a serious matter. While we want a vigorous and strong House of Lords which must play its part in controlling the Executive, we should be under no illusion; whatever powers we give Members of the upper House at the end of the process will be used. I emphasise that. There will not be any of the present deference or standing back; almost by definition, the new upper House will use whatever clout we give it. Therefore, the House must take the matter seriously, and I welcome the careful process that the Government have set in train by appointing the royal commission, which shows every promise of producing a good and constructive report, and then involving the Joint Committee and both Houses of Parliament. As my right hon. Friend the Member for Ashton-under-Lyne said, the process will take some time. I have no doubt from the debate thus far that we are taking it seriously. It is an important process that will improve our governance for the future.

5.50 pm

Mr. Robert Maclennan (Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross): The right hon. Member for Ashton-under-Lyne (Mr. Sheldon) said that this was one of those occasions when the House of Commons tended to make speeches rather than listen to them. I congratulate him on sitting throughout the debate with evident interest.

I am glad that the right hon. Gentleman is here, because I want to address an issue of great importance, which he raised. He had a somewhat world-weary view about the

prospect of reform of the upper House, based on his 30 years in this House, and one could have a degree of sympathy with that. However, he showed a perhaps surprising radicalism in his belief that the Liaison Committee might succeed in creating a new career track for Members of the House of Commons, which would so transform the work of this place that it might become a significant check on the Executive in a different manner from that which it has exercised during our time here.

One can exaggerate the extent to which there has been a falling off from a golden age of the House of Commons, which has been exceedingly partisan in the past and not just within the memory of those sitting here today. Historically—on issues such as the reform of the House of Lords during the first decade of this century, home rule for Ireland and many other matters—the House of Commons has shown itself to be a partisan place; perhaps that is its function.

As people are anxious to preserve the authority and distinctiveness of the House of Commons as the fount of Executive Government, it would seem likely that that will remain. Our approach to the reform of the House of Lords should take into account the probability that the House of Commons will remain similar to its present form. Whatever may be the developments in the Liaison Committee—about which the right hon. Member for Ashton-under-Lyne spoke—I hope that they will be progressed. The House of Lords has the potential to become more effective in the discharge of a different role from its present one.

For that reason, I was glad to hear the Leader of the House say that the royal commission should focus on that role, and should approach the matter fundamentally and—she did not use this word, although she clearly intended it—radically. That is an entirely desirable approach. That caution should prevent the royal commission from being lost in the deltoid sands at the outturn of a river—something that would occur if it waited to see how this House reforms its procedure to make it more effective.

The Leader of the House reflected the approach of the Prime Minister, before he became Prime Minister, in his John Smith speech in 1996, when he said that the Labour party had always favoured an elected upper House. That message would not be appropriate for the Government to enunciate in terms today. Having set up a royal commission, it would be wrong to follow the advice of the hon. Member for Woodspring (Dr. Fox) and tell the royal commission what it should do, for the reasons given so effectively by the hon. Member for Burnley (Mr. Pike). None the less, the royal commission will have in mind the fact that the clear view, as stated by the Prime Minister, that the Labour party has always favoured an elected second Chamber.

The right hon. Member for South Norfolk (Mr. MacGregor) and the hon. Member for Leominster (Mr. Temple-Morris) produced a kind of consensus, but I hope profoundly that that consensus does not inform the thinking of the royal commission. I could not have disagreed more with the view of the hon. Member for Leominster that it makes sense to go towards a system of election from functional constituencies. For the sake of avoiding academic discussion, I will not address the issue of whether the idea has fascist roots or not. However, it is clear that it is an impractical suggestion.

The hon. Member for Leominster spoke about the sense of giving a member of the Bar Council a position in the House of Lords as of right—but why? I am a barrister, but I cannot see why the legal profession—if that is what the hon. Gentleman is proposing—should be represented by somebody from the Bar. Why not somebody from the Law Society, or from the magistrates' clerks?

Mr. Temple-Morris: Why not?

Mr. Maclennan: Why not indeed? We could have six, seven, eight, 10 or a dozen people with some claim from a functional constituency to represent the law in its workings, and that could be true of every other profession. In terms of the medical profession, is it to be the president of the Royal College of Surgeons or the president of the Royal College of Anaesthetists? Are we to get the entire medical profession together? Are we to have the patients, as a functional constituency, electing someone to represent them in the upper House? Tourism is a huge industry, and represents tremendously important earnings capacity in this country. Who is to speak for it?

Mr. Hogg: I very much agree with the right hon. Gentleman. Is there not an added vice, to which he may shortly come—that the members chosen by some functional college would regard themselves in some way as delegates of that functional college, and would not approach matters in the broader way that I hope that Members of the second Chamber would adopt?

Mr. Maclennan: I entirely agree. Not only would there be a problem with the latitudinarianism of those who would claim to be the spokespersons for a sector of opinion, but there would be the problem of their becoming out of date. How long can they go on claiming to speak for that functional constituency? The issue has been too easily used as a kind of halfway house towards the election of the upper House.

I think that it is an evasion—an evasion of an issue that was put directly by a previous Conservative commission, led by Sir Alec Douglas-Home in 1978, on the composition of the upper House. That report completely refuted the speech of the right hon. Member for South Norfolk (Mr. MacGregor), a former Leader of the House, in terms. It stated:

"Moral authority can only come from the direct election of its Members."

There is the point. We have not heard enough in the debate about the virtues of democracy.

The Leader of the House talked about the importance of legitimacy, and that is a function of democracy. However, if the new, reformed House is to speak with authority, it must draw its legitimacy from direct elections. If it is not to be a reflection of this House—there is some consensus on that, although not on how that is to be achieved—I would suggest, praying in aid the Douglas-Home commission, that it must be elected in a different manner from the House of Commons.

Douglas-Home was not squeamish about urging a proportional system; nor would I be about advocating the single transferable vote for such elections, as it would ensure the probability that not only would no single party dominate that House but that its Members would represent substantially different constituencies, drawn from a much

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wider geographical base. If the experience of other countries with the single transferable vote is any guide, it would also bring in that very mix of people that it is our common wish to see elected.

Mr. Letwin: I am puzzled by the right hon. Gentleman's remarks because I understood his party to favour that system for this House. How would its introduction in the second Chamber differentiate it from the first if his desires for the first were also achieved?

Mr. Maclennan: The hon. Gentleman is running a little behind, which is surprising from him, as he is one of the most acute members of the Conservative Front Bench. The Liberal Democrats happily welcomed the Jenkins report's recommendation of alternative vote plus for this House, which would build on existing parliamentary constituencies—that is its virtue—but that is something entirely different from what is being advocated for the upper House. We are observing the rubric of the Douglas-Home commission, which seems to make eminently good sense.

Mr. Temple-Morris: The right hon. Gentleman knows that I am a supporter of electoral reform, but does he seriously think that the House would create an upper House that could in many ways be argued to be more representative than this place? Does he honestly think that that is on, or practical?

Mr. Maclennan: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for acknowledging that the single transferable vote is an eminently democratic system of election, but I would not for a minute suggest that it is more democratic than the proposal of the Jenkins commission, which will be the subject of a referendum. That is how the matter should be decided, and how the Government have undertaken that it will be decided. I do not doubt that the House can live with a touch of democracy, if that is what he is inferring that it might not be prepared to accept.

Most of today's speeches have, rightly, focused on what is the point of the upper House, what it should do that it is not doing and whether it needs more powers to do it effectively. It is fair to say that the House of Lords has many powers that it feels constrained from using because it lacks legitimacy. I do not set my face against change, and there are several areas in which I think that it would be desirable—for example, involving the upper House, as has been suggested by many of its Members, in greater scrutiny of treaty making, and giving it more of a role in scrutinising secondary legislation—but the real inhibition on the effectiveness of the upper House concerns not its powers but the sense that, if it were to seek to face down the Government, its wings would be clipped.

That is why I asked the right hon. Member for South Norfolk the question, which he did not answer, whether there were occasions on which he would now, with the benefit of hindsight, say that it would have been a good thing if the Government of which he was a distinguished member for a long time had been faced down by a reformed second Chamber. He has not said so, so we must take it that it is his view that the present balance of power between the Executive and the legislature, in its manifestation in the House of Lords, is about right. That is why he did not advocate anything more fundamental or radical than he did.

Mr. MacGregor: I should have thought that the four areas that I listed showed where I thought that the upper Chamber, and to some extent this House, was deficient in its scrutiny of the Executive.

Mr. Maclennan: I acknowledge that the right hon. Gentleman has argued that there are deficiencies, but he has not said how he would give the upper House the authority to deal with them effectively. By espousing the minimalist changes that he has recommended, he fortifies the belief that he is broadly content with the current balance of power between the Executive and the legislature.

Mr. Hogg: The right hon. Gentleman is asking, fairly, whether those who have been in government can identify measures that we think that the upper House should have rejected. I most certainly can: for example, the ability that we instituted to try people for war crimes committed during the second world war; that was wrong in principle and I wish that the second Chamber had voted it down. As a rather more dramatic example, with hindsight, the community charge was a disaster and I very much wish that the other place had voted that down, too.

Mr. Maclennan: Not for the first time, the right hon. and learned Gentleman has shown himself to be more robust and outspoken than some of his colleagues, but his example of the war crimes legislation was a rather surprising one, because it was an occasion on which the upper House did indeed vote down the Government, although it was not of course able to carry its way because, ultimately, the Parliament Act was invoked.

We have not had a debate about the Parliament Act and whether it should be more widely open to the House of Lords to have the last word. If the pre-eminence of the House of Commons in our polity flows from anything, it is first from the fact that it is the bed from which Ministers are plucked, and secondly from the fact that we have the last word on legislation, save in the extraordinary case, referred to specifically by the Leader of the House, of the possibility of extending the life of a Parliament beyond five years.

There are other matters over which it might be reasonable to consider that the House of Lords should be able to exercise such a power. The essence of the power that it has is in respect of major constitutional change, and that principle might be embraced for issues such as any suggestion of tampering with the Representation of the People Acts and the provisions for secret voting.

Mr. Grieve: I earlier said that I did not consider the Irish model a particularly good one, but may I extol one virtue of it—the possibility of a conflict on a constitutional issue being the trigger for a referendum?

Mr. Maclennan: That is an entirely sensible suggestion, and I would be happy to endorse it.

On constitutional matters, because of the dominance of this Chamber by the Government, which I believe to be virtually inevitable, it is valuable to have another

Chamber with a checking power. It should not be a power to stand in the way for all time if there is consensus for reform, but if there is doubt about that consensus—about the view of the public—it would seem appropriate to give the House of Lords the ability to block legislation. For example, it would have been appropriate to block the winding up of the government of London without the calling of a referendum of the kind referred to by the hon. Member for Beaconsfield (Mr. Grieve).

The composition of the second Chamber should embrace the principle of democratic legitimacy. The argument deployed against that by the proponents of a partially, or even predominantly, appointed upper House is that the great virtue of the House of Lords as it stands is its expertise.

It is true that there are people of quality of mind and of experience—business experience, and so forth. I do not deny that we have been able to enjoy contributions of great merit and moment from such people in the past. I think they have probably given the raft, or the afflatus of oxygen, that has kept the place alive, but I feel less certain whether we should look to that as the crucial test in the future. That is partly because of the difficulties associated with functional constituencies, which will spill over however we decide to appoint, rather than to elect, the Members.

If we are to appoint people of experience, how do we choose them? That is made no easier by removing the political element from the choice and putting the function at arm's length from the Government by setting up an appointments commission, itself perhaps appointed by the Government. There is still a real problem of choice. The wisest people in the world, choosing among the wisest people available, would still not be able to satisfy us that those people were, by virtue of their expertise, more legitimate than many who were not appointed. That is an impossibilist course to advocate.

It makes sense for people to put their trust in democracy. If the upper House is drawn from a different base, and elected by a different franchise and method of election, and if it has clearly demarcated functions, it will attract a different kind of person.

I have heard the arguments across the Chamber about whether there should be Ministers in the upper House. Personally, I think that there are powerful arguments against their being there. If there were no Ministers in the upper House, that would remove at a stroke people who desire to be involved in the career patronage there, which is a pale reflection of what happens in this House but still to some extent colours that House's proceedings. That is a meritorious argument, worthy of consideration.

If the avenue of the revitalised upper House is not the primary route to ministerial office, that House will in any event have a different flavour and function, and could attract different people. It might prove attractive to public spirited people who have made their mark in other walks of life, and who wish to give some direct public service at a later stage, perhaps, than the younger professional full-time politicians who, it has been suggested, now dominate our debates, although to me that charge seems a slight exaggeration. That would certainly be a different sort of upper House, and that is where I would put my trust.

I hope that, in considering the functions and the reform of the upper House, Lord Wakeham and his colleagues will not be too sensitive about the possibility of the House of Commons bolting because of its fear of what a revitalised upper House might do. It would be a discreditable stance for this House to say that the legitimacy of the other House should, in perpetuity—or even as far ahead as we can see—remain tarnished by other than democratic principles. To put it more simply, the upper House should become as democratically legitimate as this House.

Sir Patrick Cormack: The right hon. Gentleman is making an interesting speech, but how, in his directly elected upper House, would he ensure that those who do not belong to a party would have the opportunity of being elected? How could he ensure that elections would not be conducted on party lines? If he could not, he could not guarantee the presence of any independents.

Mr. Maclennan: That problem has exercised me; that is why I have retained a residual commitment to an element involving appointed Members. There is a case—perhaps not a very strong one—for such an element, to accommodate just such people. That has always—or at least, for the past decade or so—been my party's position, and I see the point of it.

When we consider the performance of the upper House today, we see that one can exaggerate the significance of that independent element, as it now exists, in shaping policy and reactions to the Government. The participation rates of the so-called independents and Cross Benchers, both in votes and in other ways, are substantially lower than those of the partisan Members who accept a Whip. We also have to weigh in the balance the concern that the more one increases the independent Cross-Bench element, the more one decreases the right of the House to be listened to on equal terms with this House as an expression of genuine democratic opinion.

Mr. Grieve: May I ask the right hon. Gentleman the question that I asked the hon. Member for Leominster (Mr. Temple-Morris), about co-option? Surely there would be more legitimacy if the Members who had been elected, by whatever means, were required to co-opt a certain percentage of Members of the upper House to deliberate with them. That would introduce the independent element that is so desirable.

Mr. Maclennan: It is asking too much, even of altruism, to expect people to co-opt independents. Even in the sort of House that I am talking about, I cannot imagine that the Whips would play no part.

Mr. Grieve: Suppose that we had a system in which co-option was done by two-thirds majority voting, with the aim of ensuring that independent Members were brought in. That might work quite well, and we would be mistaken to ignore the possibility.

Mr. Maclennan: I ignore nothing, and I shall certainly explore that idea—but I tend to think that if partisanship

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were not the quality sought by those doing the co-opting, clubability might replace it, and I am not sure that that would be any better.

On the other hand, it is right to emphasise to the Wakeham commission our overriding desire that the main defects of the upper House should be removed. Despite its expertise, the quality of its best debates, and the assiduity of its tireless Members, who sit through the night and sometimes long into the summer, the importance of the House of Lords is diminishing in our scheme of things, because it is not democratic. There is no way of reversing that by tinkering. Either we accept the need for democracy in that Chamber or we shall have to start thinking in terms of unicameralism and other ways of bringing the Executive to task, for we cannot look to that House in its present form to do that.

I do not think that this House can, or should, behave very differently from the way that it behaves already. That is not a matter of complacency. I have found its ways so unappealing at times that I have even been forced to change my political party, so I do not make that remark lightly. However, in reality, a House that is the avenue to Executive office will always be one in which the Government have great and overwhelming influence, except when an accident of electoral fate results in a narrow majority.

That being so, we would do well to use this great opportunity to reform the House of Lords that the Government are giving us to see whether we can include more checks and balance in our system, and build in greater balance between the Executive and the legislature. That is certainly long overdue.

6.20 pm

Mr. Mark Fisher (Stoke-on-Trent, Central): It is a pleasure to follow the right hon. Member for Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross (Mr. Maclennan), especially as I agree with so much of what he said. Indeed, many elements of the debate appear to be agreed by hon. Members from all parts of the House. There seems to be agreement that we should have a reformed and modern second Chamber, that it should be independent, representative, distinctive and non-competitive—that is, that the second Chamber should complement rather than challenge this Chamber's authority and primacy.

However, I said that hon. Members appear to agree on those points, because I suspect that those characteristics mean different things to different people. For example, there is the question of independence. I suspect that the deputy shadow Leader of the House, the hon. Member for South Staffordshire (Sir P. Cormack)—and the Leader of the House in her opening remarks—used the word "independence" to mean "of no party". To me, and I sense to many others, it is much more interesting and important that independence should refer to independence of government.

That is hard to achieve, because the power of government in both Chambers, as exercised by the Whips and as described many hon. Members in this debate, is reinforced by the understandable ambitions of people—in this House and in the other place, and regardless of whether they are in opposition—to achieve government. Therefore, the only way to ensure true independence for a second Chamber is to remove the Government from it, and to make it a House of parliamentarians, in which parliamentary scrutiny is an end in itself.

I was interested that the hon. Member for South Staffordshire implied that that would not be attractive to people. I agree with the right hon. Member for Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross and believe that it would be attractive. It is an important and fascinating role, and the enthusiasm and skill with which Select Committees in both Houses fulfil it shows how important and satisfying it could be.

There is general agreement that the power of the Executive has grown under all Governments, both in general and in particular. Reference has been made to the enormous growth over recent Parliaments in the numbers of statutory instruments, and to the fact that they cannot be amended. I disagree with those who seem to criticise the House of Commons, at least by implication, for not doing a decent job in holding the Government to account. Faced with Governments and Executives, of both parties, who have skilfully and successfully found it to be an imperative of government in a difficult and complex state to take more power to themselves, the House of Commons does its scrutiny work well. That is evident in the work of the Select Committees and, often, in debate.

It is regrettable that Question Times have become almost a farce. Their style is reminiscent of Japanese Noh theatre, with the Minister knowing what the question will be and hon. Members knowing what the answer will be. They are of little democratic interest and are not effective in holding the Government to account, but in other respects the House of Commons does a good job. However, a second Chamber, especially one freed from the Executive and with scrutiny as its prime role, could and would perform differently. In doing so, it would augment the quality of our Parliament, and vary the type of scrutiny to which the Executive are subjected.

There is also the question of representation. It is right that a second Chamber must be representative, but representative of whom, and accountable to whom? If the second Chamber is appointed, it can be representative only of the will of the person, or of the commission of selection, who appointed it. However much the Prime Minister wants to place that commission at arm's length—a laudable aim—it will be appointed by government and inevitably will be made up of the great and the good. It is their stamp, therefore, that will be on that Chamber.

Most crucially, not only will the Chamber not be representative of anyone but the commission, but it will not be accountable to anyone. That idea is ridiculous and an affront.

Mr. Hogg: I have followed the hon. Gentleman's argument and broadly agree. However, is not the criticism of an appointed Chamber ultimately that it lacks political legitimacy? In the world in which we live, the only legitimacy that stands scrutiny is that which stems from election.

Mr. Fisher: The right hon. and learned Gentleman anticipates my next point: a Chamber that is neither representative nor accountable has no roots in our nation, and so has no democratic legitimacy. I strongly believe in a Chamber that is democratically elected and accountable to people. That is how we all came to be here, and it is

therefore the source of the legitimacy of half of Parliament. The task, as we enter a new century, is to determine how to finish democracy's job and extend that democratic accountability beyond this Chamber to the whole of Parliament.

Sir Patrick Cormack: On a point of clarification, is it implicit in the hon. Gentleman's remarks that the Head of State should also be elected?

Mr. Fisher: Certainly not: we are talking about our Parliament, all of which I believe should be accountable to the people of this country. At present, people are denied any say in half of our Parliament. In all the debates, media articles and speculation on the subject—which the Government and the royal commission have rightly stimulated by at long last facing up to the problem—we have heard little about the rights of the people.

That is true, too, about this evening's debate. Much has been heard about the theoretical virtues of different bases of representation and composition, but where do people fit in? There is a distaste for, or a lack of interest in, what people in this country are being denied that I find extraordinary. Surely the right to vote for the people who will determine and scrutinise legislation is at the core of our democracy. We have just created Parliaments for Scotland and for Wales, and there is one in Northern Ireland. We are reforming local authorities and tomorrow we will elect people to represent us at the European Parliament.

It would be outrageous if, in forming the new Parliaments and renewing our representation in the forums that already exist, we said that part of the representation in those forums should be by appointment. No one has suggested that that should happen by appointment. No one has suggested that it would be better if the Parliament in Scotland had been partly appointed, or indirectly elected through the Scottish local authorities. People in Scotland wanted a voice in their Parliament, and I believe that the people of the wider United Kingdom have a right to a say over everyone who sits in their legislature.

Mr. Forth: I agree with the thrust of what the hon. Gentleman has said, but does he accept that we have agreed to a unicameral legislature in Scotland, which not many people would contemplate for the UK as a whole? Is that not a paradox?

Mr. Fisher: It may be so, but a Parliament such as Scotland's, which contains a comparatively small number of Members, would find it difficult to define two distinct roles. The right hon. Gentleman asks an open and interesting question, but, given that we have a complicated United Kingdom Parliament augmented by separate Parliaments in Scotland and Wales, the people of Scotland made the right decision.

We have tried appointed systems in the past. Our first Members of the European Parliament were appointed from this Chamber, not elected. We were right to abandon that system, saying that the people had the right to say directly who should represent them in the European Parliament. We were right, too, to get rid of the aldermanic system. There used to be functional constituencies in the universities and we were right to get rid of those.

The history of our democracy has been of a slow clawing back from the Executive—first, the monarch, then the lords and the aristocracy—the right of the people to have a say. We completed that process only in this century when, between the wars and at long last, women got the vote. Universal democracy is a recent innovation, but we have never had it in full. It has applied to only half of our legislature. We have an opportunity to say that everyone who discusses legislation and affairs of state should be elected. Anything less is unacceptable.

I respect my hon. Friend the Member for Leominster (Mr. Temple-Morris), who clearly disagrees with me. He and others will have to tell their constituents that we are modernising the House of Lords, but that they should have no say in who should sit in it. They will have to tell their constituents that the choice should be made for them and that someone should appoint those who sit in it. Can any hon. Member on either side of the House seriously look his or her constituents in the eye and tell them that they are not sufficiently wise or competent to decide who should sit in the second Chamber during the next century?

Sir Patrick Cormack: With the greatest respect to the hon. Gentleman, for whom I have a real affection, that is precisely what his Government will make people do tomorrow. No one will be directly elected. No voter in any constituency will vote for an individual.

Mr. Fisher: I rather agree with the hon. Gentleman. I was not happy with the closed-list system and I do not like being unable to distinguish between individual representatives. Some representatives of each party do a good job, and others do not. People in our towns and cities know very well who the competent people are, but they will not be able tomorrow to ensure that the competent return to Brussels while the incompetent return whence they came.

We need to establish that people have the right to a say. The Government are fond of the expression "the many, not the few". It is becoming a mantra, and I would willingly never hear it again.

Mr. Forth: How about "the third way"?

Mr. Fisher: I do not disagree with the spirit of the expression, merely with the way in which it trips off the tongue, sucked of almost all meaning. The principle is correct, of course, but it is ironic that a Government for whom the many, not the few is a mantra should appear so uncertain about giving the many—the democracy—the right to vote rather than giving it to the few, or the oligarchy.

If we have an appointed or even an indirectly elected second Chamber, we shall turn away from democracy, which is government by the people, to oligarchy, which is government by the select few. Will we really enter the 21st century by modernising our second Chamber so that we have an oligarchy? Is that the way to express our country's needs? It is absurd. We are a democratic people and we have fought hard for centuries to try to extend democracy. Thanks to the Government, it is at long last within our grasp, but we seem uncertain about whether we wish to grasp the opportunity.

The most compelling argument against an elected second Chamber made tonight and by the Government has been that the authority conferred by elections to both

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would create gridlock, threatening the primacy of the Commons and undermining the clarity of government. The authority of government resides in this Chamber, and it is here that the Government are rightly held to account. I do not accept that argument. That need not happen as long as the rules and the functions of the two Chambers are distinct.

Over several decades, we have made the mistake of establishing primacy in this Chamber by the illegitimacy of the membership of the other Chamber. Except for a few diehards who love the hereditary principle, the other place is cautious about exercising its many and considerable powers because the world and the Members of the other place know that it is illegitimate. We have been content that that has been so because it has established our authority, but our primacy should not rely on a broken-backed composition of the other Chamber. It should depend on clarity in the roles and functions of the two Chambers. The way in which to establish that clarity is by enacting a new Parliament Act.

Mr. Tyrie: The existence of the Parliament Acts is the reason why gridlock would be unlikely. They give supremacy to this House and, in the event of a clash, the Commons can always win by exercising the Acts. Only once has there been gridlock in the modern history of the two Houses, and that arose over the definition of the rules of the Parliament Acts themselves.

Mr. Fisher: Some people would say that we have come close to gridlock in recent weeks. I agree with much of what the hon. Gentleman has said—and has written extremely well—about the House of Lords, but the Parliament Acts are deficient in some key respects. If we are to establish clear and distinct roles for the two Chambers, which must be the aim of any reform, we need a new Parliament Act that will recognise and enshrine the primacy of the Commons and legislate on areas currently covered by the Salisbury convention.

The growth of that convention since 1945 is the reason why the Parliament Acts are unsatisfactory. It is wrong to distinguish between the two Chambers by convention alone. It would be clearer and simpler to have their roles detailed in primary legislation that would maintain for the second Chamber the power to amend and delay—though possibly for a shorter period—and that would extend that Chamber's powers to secondary and European legislation. A new Act should remove some of the inflexibility of the present Acts with regard to unamended Bills, and it should extend to House of Lords Bills and delegated legislation. It should also provide procedures for mediation. Of course, if the Government were removed from that Chamber, its power to initiate legislation would have to be removed.

Mr. Grieve: The hon. Gentleman is making a well-reasoned and powerful speech. Does he agree that if the Lords were elected for fixed terms with rotational election so that a certain proportion were up for election at any given time, the chance of a clash would be minimised because its role would be seen as wholly distinct from that of this Chamber, whose mandate is renewed when the Government go to the country?

Mr. Fisher: Yes, but it would be essential that the Chambers were not elected at the same time, to emphasise the distinction between the two. However, that is less important than having very different functions in relation to the Executive. The most encouraging element of this debate has been the agreement among hon. Members on both sides of the House on removing the Executive from the second Chamber. That would at a stroke transform its nature, improving it radically. It would also enormously improve this Chamber and scrutiny of the Executive.

Perhaps I misunderstood, but I was surprised when the Leader of the House said that we were considering only reform of the House of Lords. The two Chambers are interdependent and their reform must be considered together. We are talking about one Parliament and how the two Chambers can work together to represent the views of our people and ensure that we are well governed. What happens in the upper Chamber affects what happens here.

I believe that such changes would recreate a modern, independent, representative, accountable, non-competitive second Chamber of which we could be proud and which this Chamber need not fear. We would benefit from its intelligence, wisdom and scrutiny, while this Chamber would continue to be the locus of government and therefore the source of power of the Executive. Those objectives depend on a democratic route to giving our people a voice that I believe to be long overdue. I hope that it will soon come to pass.

6.42 pm

Mr. Douglas Hogg (Sleaford and North Hykeham): It is a great pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Stoke-on-Trent, Central (Mr. Fisher), with whom I have had a long friendship going back to the earliest times. I regret that he is no longer a Front Bencher.

Sir Patrick Cormack: He would have made a different speech if he were.

Mr. Hogg: That may be true, but I am sure that he would be urging his case as strongly within the Government. The House is the poorer for his no longer being a Front Bencher.

I do not know whether it is strictly necessary but to avoid possible criticism I declare a personal interest in that my wife and father sit in the other Chamber and I stand to inherit a hereditary peerage. I hasten to add that I have always intended to remain in this House if my constituents are willing to make it possible.

Perhaps partly because of my background but also because of a long-standing interest in historical matters and the constitution, I have always been interested in reform of the House of Lords. I have long held first, that we should substantially increase the powers of the second Chamber and secondly, that we should therefore confer proper political legitimacy on it. That goes back to the points made by the hon. Member for Stoke-on-Trent, Central. The only legitimacy that exists in Britain today stems from direct election. I shall explain in more detail later, but I therefore conclude that the second Chamber should have substantially increased powers and be largely—or as I would prefer, wholly—elected.

Discussion of the composition of the second Chamber must begin by focusing on powers and functions. The Government's approach has been criticised because it deals with composition separately from functions and

purpose. We cannot consider functions without also considering how this House performs its function of holding the Government to proper account. If this House is discharging its functions well, we need to make relatively little change to the powers of the second Chamber; it is only if this House is not exercising its functions well that we need substantially to enhance them. If we are content to leave the second Chamber with its powers largely as they are now—this is not my position—I would argue that there is no real case for changing its composition either.

In fact, there is an argument for the present composition of the second Chamber. There are advantages in a mixed system of hereditary and appointed peers. Most obviously, there is a measure of independence to be found among the hereditary peerage that should be acknowledged by this House. We must also acknowledge that appointment does not by itself confer any more obvious legitimacy than the hereditary principle, but it does confer on the Government very extensive powers of patronage that I regard as undesirable. However, I do not have to defend the status quo on composition because I want the second Chamber's powers to be greatly enhanced.

I have come to this view—to be fair to myself, I held it as a Minister over 13 years—because I do not believe that this House will or can properly hold a Government and Executive to account. It is not just a lack of will, but an inherent inability that stems from the constitutional settlement that has existed for very many years. The right hon. Member for Ashton-under-Lyne (Mr. Sheldon) was right about that.

We do not have a separation of powers. From that, it follows that the Executive are in this Chamber. Provided that the Executive can control their own party, they can do as they please, subject to relatively few external constraints. There are some, which I shall mention shortly but only touch on now. The European Union has a measure of control, as does the European convention on human rights. Subject to those, the Executive who control their own party can do what they please. That is inherent in the constitution. Of course, the problem is aggravated by a Government with a very large majority as we have now, but we have had a Conservative Government with a very large majority. It is further aggravated—this is probably the only party political point that I shall make—if we have a Prime Minister and Ministers who have a highly developed contempt for this House.

In substance, the problem has nothing to do with the Labour party, but is inherent in the constitutional settlement that has been in place for decades. It stems from the fact that there is no separation of powers. In that respect, I have always held that the American model was infinitely preferable. However, I am not foolish enough to suppose that we shall ever bring it about—at least not in my lifetime, and probably not in the lifetime of my children or my grandchildren.

An Opposition Whip, my hon. Friend the Member for Cheadle (Mr. Day), is sitting in front of me, so I am sorry to have to say that the very tight control that parties exercise over their Back Benchers undermines democracy. I thought so when I was a Conservative Government Whip, although, having taken the Queen's salt, I performed my functions with enthusiasm.

Sir Patrick Cormack: My right hon. and learned Friend was dreadful.

Mr. Hogg: As my hon. Friend says, I was dreadful. I was certainly a vigorous Whip, but I acted disapproving of myself. Furthermore, if I may say so, I did not necessarily have a high regard for those of my colleagues to whom I gave instruction. The tight control that the Whips exercise over their parties positively diminishes the reputation of this place and indeed our ability to control the Executive.

Mr. Letwin: Does my right hon. and learned Friend agree that the fault lies mainly not with the people who are doing the whipping, but with the recipients, in that the system does not provide for the recipients to resist the whipping by giving them an alternative career course?

Mr. Hogg: I remember articulating the same argument back in 1979 when the noble Lord St. John of Fawsley—or Mr. St. John-Stevas as he was then—introduced the Select Committee system. At that time, we articulated the argument that Back Benchers would have an independent career structure that would make them readier to resist the power of the Whip. I do not believe that that has really worked. As long as the Executive are Members of this place, the ambitions, fears and inhibitions of right hon. and hon. Members will always dilute their ability to speak their own mind and to do what they would do if they were to follow their consciences.

Mr. Rowe: My right hon. and learned Friend makes a powerful and interesting point. Does he agree that there has been an enormous escalation in the practice of the popular media highlighting "disloyalty" when people stand up for their principles, and that that is a nonsensical undermining of democracy?

Mr. Hogg: My hon. Friend is entirely right. Of course, that gives the party Whip—although I make no personal observations about my hon. Friend the Member for Cheadle—

Mr. Stephen Day (Cheadle): I thank my right hon. and learned Friend.

Mr. Hogg: The party Whips have another instrument with which to chastise and coerce their Back Benchers. They can tell Back Benchers, "You will be portrayed as dividing this great, united party of ours", so my hon. Friend the Member for Faversham and Mid-Kent (Mr. Rowe) is right.

Mr. Fisher: I agree with the right hon. and learned Gentleman's critique, but he seeks to place all the blame on the Government. Does he not feel that this Chamber shares some of the blame? It is perfectly within the powers of this Chamber to insist, by a vote, that it should elect members of Select Committees, rather than leaving that power to the Whips. Much of the power that has been

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removed from this Chamber to the Executive has been with its agreement—or, at least, with its nodding and tacit consent.

Mr. Hogg: The hon. Gentleman is correct. If this House wanted to exercise its powers, it would be a truly sovereign and democratic institution. However, for a variety of reasons—some of which I have tried to identify—this House does not choose to employ the powers that we, as Members, could exercise if we were to vote according to our individual beliefs.

The point that I have been trying to make is that those defects are not merely theoretical; they are real and they distort the way in which business is carried out. I will give two examples from the Labour Government's period in office and, to be fair, will cite two examples from the previous Conservative Government's time in office. In relation to the Labour Government, if the House had voted in accordance with its actual wishes, rather than those of the Whips, the Government would not have put through a substantial portion of their welfare legislation. To take the other example—in respect of which the hon. Member for Walsall, North (Mr. Winnick) was in the Chamber at the beginning of the debate—we should not have passed the European Parliamentary Elections Act 1999 with the possibility of the closed list system. Those measures would not have been passed.

During the period that the Conservative Government were in office, I do not believe that the legislation relating to the Maastricht treaty would have been approved by this House—certainly not without a referendum clause—had the House spoken in accordance with its wishes. Furthermore, the community charge legislation would not have passed if the House had spoken according to its wishes. We should acknowledge those facts.

Mr. Gareth Thomas (Clwyd, West): I am sure that the right hon. and learned Gentleman will have anticipated my question and I shall be interested to hear his answer. Would not that strict party control exercised by the Whips be a feature of an elected second Chamber, even one that did not have an Executive element, bearing in mind the fact that the need for enforcing party discipline and unity would still be an argument that could be deployed?

Mr. Hogg: I shall develop that point later, but will give a brief answer now. There might be a degree of such control, but, because there would not be the same scope for ambition, the influence that the Whips could exercise in an elected second Chamber would be much less.

I have focused on the big issues, but we need to keep in mind that this defect also extends to the small issues—the detail of Bills. The grip that the Whips maintain on their parties is as great in Committee as it is in the Chamber. What happens in Committee in relation to the detail of legislation is frequently as important as what happens during the major debates on policy or on Second Reading.

To develop that point further, we need to understand that there is nothing in our constitution that guarantees minority rights. Provided that the Government of the day retain their control over members of their parliamentary party, they can do much as they please. Minority rights are not entrenched under our system—although they are entrenched in many other systems—and I regard that as a serious defect in the way in which we conduct our affairs.

Mr. Grieve: Does my right hon. and learned Friend agree that, if anything, minority rights are threatened even more nowadays, because of the growth of the belief that when the people have spoken through the mandate of an election, any opposition to that expressed wish becomes improper in some way?

Mr. Hogg: My hon. Friend makes an extremely important point, about which I make two comments. First, I have always regarded the manifesto doctrine as complete rubbish. The fact that detailed policy propositions may be set out in a manifesto does not give the Government a blank cheque to carry out those policies. Truth to tell, only a tiny proportion of Members of Parliament will read their party's manifesto—far less the electorate as a whole. The manifesto doctrine is rubbish.

Secondly, I believe that minorities have rights that they are entitled to assert even against majorities. All Governments and Members of this House should realise that they have a limited right to effect change.

Mr. Edward Garnier (Harborough): I apologise to my right hon. and learned Friend for interrupting him. He mentioned his views on the principle behind the manifesto doctrine. Might not the same be said for the votes taken in this House at 10 o'clock? A huge proportion of Members do not listen to the debates, but simply go into the Lobby to which they are directed. Does my right hon. and learned Friend accept that there is at least a possibility—although it is no more than that—that the Human Rights Act 1998 may entrench the rights of minorities in a way that has not previously been the case?

Mr. Hogg: I was just coming to the second proposition that my hon. and learned Friend makes, but his first reinforces my basic point, which is that the House of Commons is not an effective defender of rights, and nor does it provide an effective method of holding Governments to account. Let us not get personal—we should all admit to flocking in at 10 o'clock and asking a Whip which way we should vote, even though that is not a proper way in which to discharge our functions.

I said that there were one or two external controls, and my hon. and learned Friend has mentioned one: the European convention on human rights. The concept of a Bill of Rights is one way in which to entrench rights; I am broadly in favour of incorporating the European convention into domestic law and glad that that has happened. Although that gives judges a policy-making role, they have had such a role ever since we first subscribed to the convention. The question is whether they should be based in the UK or in Strasbourg; my preference is that they should be UK-based, subject to appeal. That is a constraint of which I am broadly in favour. A second lies in our membership of the EU, which carries both rights and obligations, and I am bound to say that I am less enthusiastic for that model of control, because the democratic underpinning is far less good than it ought to be.

That brings me to my main point. I believe that we ought to create a bicameral system in which the second Chamber has powers that are very similar to those of this

House. Let me be candid: my objective is to create in the second Chamber an elected body that has a genuine ability to constrain and restrict the power of the Executive. I want to create a body or forum in which there will be more effective scrutiny of the detail of legislation than is exercised in this place. Finally, I want the second Chamber to provide effective entrenchment of minority rights.

To create a second Chamber with such extensive powers, one must confer legitimacy on it, and that takes me back to my intervention on the hon. Member for Stoke-on-Trent, Central, with which he was good enough to agree. Where Parliaments and representative bodies are involved, the only legitimacy that is now accorded respect is that which stems from election. Therefore, I am in favour of a second Chamber that is elected either wholly or to a very large extent, certainly by direct franchise.

Right hon. and hon. Members have expressed criticism of such a system and I have some sympathy with their views. I agree that we must not create a facsimile of the House of Commons in the other place—that would be a tragedy. Therefore, those right hon. and hon. Members who say that the Executive should not be represented in the other place are absolutely right. Ministers from this place can go to the other place to answer questions and participate in debates there, but we want to remove the ministerial career structure from that place. To answer the hon. Member for Clwyd, West (Mr. Thomas), I think that such an arrangement would diminish the Whips' control in the other place.

I also want different electoral arrangements. To the right hon. Member for Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross (Mr. Maclennan), I say that I am not hostile to the use of proportional representation in respect of the other place, even though I am wholly opposed to its use in respect of the House of Commons. I am sorry that I cannot carry my right hon. Friend the Member for Bromley and Chislehurst (Mr. Forth) with me on that point. I should also like elections to the second Chamber to be staged: that is, a rolling programme with one third of Members subject to election at a time.

Mr. Garnier: The problem with using proportional representation or some other form of election for the other place is that it would confer a different degree of legitimacy. Although I agree with much of my right hon. and learned Friend's argument, if we had different systems of election for each House, I fear that the other place would be criticised by Members of the House of Commons as lacking the quality of legitimacy that we have.

Mr. Hogg: I am not sure that I agree with that criticism. The reason why I am opposed to PR being used in elections to this place is not that it confers less political legitimacy on the outcome, but that it makes good government almost impossible. That is a different problem altogether. Because PR can result in an equally representative—perhaps more representative—body, it would not be open to Members of this place, who are elected by first past the post, to say that those who were elected by PR are less representative. I do not want PR here, but not because it would create a less representative body.

My final point relates to the risk of creating the potential for deadlock. There is a danger of deadlock, but it is perfectly possible to create anti-deadlock mechanisms. The exact mechanism, its shape and weighting, depends on the balance one wishes to strike between the two Houses. However, one would have to bear in mind the fact that we are talking about having two elected Chambers—two democratic Chambers; having recognised that, one begins to realise that those who assert the primacy of this House have not faced up to the fact that there would be another House of equal respectability. Such a House is what I want to create.

I cannot say that I am optimistic. I believe that what will emerge from the process is a model that does not satisfy the aspirations of those of us who want there to be a second Chamber with greatly enhanced powers and, therefore, one that is wholly or largely elected. However, if that is what emerges, we will have missed a great opportunity, so we should not be backward about asserting our beliefs, even though people will say that I am advocating the removal of powers from the House of Commons. In fact, if my analysis is correct and acted on, it would diminish the powers of the Executive and, in the words of the great and historic resolution passed by this House, the power of the Executive

"has increased, is increasing, and ought to be diminished."

7.7 pm

Mr. Alan Hurst (Braintree): I am grateful to be able to speak in this debate and to follow so many distinguished and erudite right hon. and hon. Members who have long experience of constitutional matters. I agree with my right hon. Friend the Member for Ashton-under-Lyne (Mr. Sheldon), other than with his distaste for Governments with large majorities—it is harder for one whose constituency majority is only 1,500 to accept that view. That matter aside, there was merit in his somewhat pessimistic assessment of the whole question of House of Lords reform.

We have to consider composition. In an ideal world, we would start with powers and then move on to composition, but each form of composition has a different effect on the outcome. There are three forms of composition on offer: election, appointment and the hybrid form, one possible manifestation of which was described by my hon. Friend the Member for Leominster (Mr. Temple-Morris), who dipped his toe into functionalism.

The idea of the second Chamber being elected is gathering a head of steam, especially among the Opposition, but it has inherent problems which can be seen in countries with a history that is somewhat similar to our own. One hundred and thirty years ago, the United States Senate was a shadow of its current self: all the action after the American civil war was led by the House of Representatives, which overshadowed the Senate at that time.

The balance of power between those two bodies has changed since then, as a consequence of the change from Senators being indirectly elected to their being directly elected. Until about 1914, they had been elected from the state assemblies; thereafter, the American Senate had the ability to take to itself power and authority that it had not had before. If we go down the route of having a directly elected upper House, we should be aware that such a House will take to itself powers additional to those that we give it, because that is what constitutional bodies always do if they believe that they have the authority to do so.

[Mr. Alan Hurst]

If we take that approach, the question then is what method of election we adopt. We perhaps saw the House of Lords at its worst on the question of the European elections. Five or six times it ping-ponged back to this House the European elections legislation because, in the first place, it did not approve of any form of proportional representation. Once it had accepted proportional representation, the argument was about whether the list should be open or closed. We ended up with a closed list which, I suspect, has a very small minority of support in this House and in the House of Lords. When the House of Lords had the opportunity, because of the time pressure on the European elections legislation, it funked it and did not act as a check or barrier to the power of the Executive.

If we adopt a system of proportional representation for the upper Chamber and hold the elections at different times from those for this House, we will move almost inevitably into gridlock because both Houses will try to assert their power. I understand why those of a Conservative disposition would not be averse to gridlock. I do not mean to be offensive when I say that it has always been the position of the Conservatives, at least until the past 20 years, to avoid undue change.

Historically, Conservatives have been supporters of upper Houses or second Chambers, and radicals have normally been opposed to them. That is because radicals wish to move matters along and Conservatives wish to slow everything down or wish for nothing to change at all. If that is still the case, support for a second Chamber is to be anticipated on the right of politics but is more surprising on the left. The right hon. and learned Member for Sleaford and North Hykeham (Mr. Hogg) claimed that more powers should be given to an upper House, and that fits logically with the gridlock approach to democracy.

Why are we considering an upper House at all? It is because we want to put a check on the Executive and on democracy itself.

Mr. Maclennan: I would not favour gridlock, and I take seriously the criticism the hon. Gentleman makes. Does he agree, however, that, on occasions, gridlock might reflect the public wish, as in the case of the poll tax? Gridlock can be dissolved by public opinion when an election is imminent. Those who are sustaining opposition to the Executive can be punished at the polls if they do so unreasonably.

Mr. Hurst: I understand the right hon. Gentleman's view, but I submit that the disadvantages of gridlock outweigh the protection he suggests. He mentioned the poll tax, but the party that introduced that tax was not punished at the polls subsequently. It was returned to office.

In other countries, such as Australia, which has an upper House, a double dissolution is the most common way to resolve disputes between the two Houses. Often, the dispute is not resolved, because one House is elected on a variation of our electoral system and the other by proportional representation. The upper House seldom has an overall majority.

If we have an elected upper House, we will let a genie out of a bottle and people will rue the fact that they cannot put it back in.

Mr. Malcolm Savidge (Aberdeen, North): Does my hon. Friend agree that gridlock could be avoided if one had sufficiently strong Parliament Acts?

Mr. Hurst: I have, I hope, learned the phraseology of the House in the time that I have been here, so I tell my hon. Friend that I shall come to that point later in my speech.

The other option is an appointed upper House, which runs into the barrage set up by the word "patronage". Sometimes we appear to live in a squeaky-clean intellectual world in which we believe that policies can operate entirely without patronage, party Whips, party loyalty or any other aspects of the glue that makes effective government possible. The argument against an appointed Chamber is that it would lead to patronage. How would its members be appointed fairly? Would the Prime Minister be completely unbiased, and would the Leader of the Opposition put forward the best names available? Would a commission be impartial? Who is to appoint the impartial commission? All those problems argue against an entirely appointed upper House.

My hon. Friend the Member for Leominster proposed a notion that was interesting both historically and intellectually. He suggested a combination or hybrid system. He said that the elected system had defects and the appointed system had defects and that we should therefore have a combination of the two. However, that is like saying that if one has one bad egg and adds another to it, one somehow achieves a good egg. In my submission, one achieves a doubly bad egg, unless my biology is in error. Any argument against an elected system or an appointed system applies twofold to any hybrid or combined system. However, it is only by going outside an elected system that we could bring in to the House the experts, the wise men, the Solomons of our time who would deliberate and hold back from foolishness, and ensure that we did not destroy the prospects for the future of this nation.

Mr. Desmond Swayne (New Forest, West): Does the hon. Gentleman agree that the model whereby some Lords sit ex officio, as the bishops do, is useful? They have authority because of the office they hold, and that is not resented. It also serves a useful function in this House by sparing us the deliberations of the clergy of the established Church.

Mr. Hurst: That is an interesting point. It was well said by Bagehot that if we had an ideal House of Commons, it is certain that we should not need a higher Chamber. To paraphrase more modern authors, as Simon and Garfunkel said in "Mrs. Robinson":

"Every way you look at it you lose".

We would lose with an elected upper House, with an appointed upper House and with a hybrid upper House.

Why are we going through such heated discussion and intellectual strain to achieve an upper House? It is because we believe that we are failing in two ways. We are failing to operate the House of Commons effectively and also failing to control the Executive. That is why we endlessly

discuss what to do about the upper House. We should not put off the day when we consider the real problems before us—this House and control of the Executive—but we delude ourselves by thinking that we can solve the problem by creating a strange new upper House.

Mr. Grieve: Does the hon. Gentleman agree that if we reform the upper Chamber correctly, it will provide a powerful incentive for the reform of this House?

Mr. Hurst: If we attempt to reform the upper House, we will put off till doomsday any consideration of the reform of this Chamber or any effective controls on the Executive. I was pleased that the right hon. and learned Member for Sleaford and North Hykeham mentioned the words of Dunning about the powers of the Executive increasing and needing to be diminished. I remember reading that in an A-level history examination in 1963—not in a contemporary question, but in one that related to the 18th century. That problem has been with the House for centuries and, until we can tackle it within this place, it will continue.

Mr. Letwin: I have a great deal of sympathy with the hon. Gentleman's observations about the need to check the Executive within the House, which has been a theme common to many speeches this afternoon. Is he optimistic that enough can be done in this place—without diluting the Government's ability to govern—to cure the problem in the absence of an effective second Chamber?

Mr. Hurst: I am grateful that the hon. Gentleman has ascertained where my remarks are leading: we do not need a second Chamber. We have believed throughout modern times that we needed a second Chamber, but the majority of democracies do not have one. It is argued that single Chambers work only in small democracies. There are normally second Chambers in federal situations and, despite what Opposition Members might say, we are not yet in that situation.

If we had single-Chamber government, we could apply our minds to reforming the problems in this place. As a comparatively new Member of Parliament, one of the main problems seems to me to be that, when a Bill leaves the Floor of the House and goes into Committee, the party system operates as sternly in Committee as in this place. A solution might be to have a single Chamber—the Lords within the Commons, if I may put it that way—and not to allow party majorities to operate in the Committee system. It could draw instead upon a pool of independent experts and those who are learned in particular subjects.

Matters could be debated in a non-partisan manner in Committee, and those involved could seek to improve rather than destroy the Bill. The Government of the day might then accept or reject amendments to the Bill on Report without the rancour of partisanship. If we approach the matter in that way, we might make real progress towards increasing the power of the House rather than chasing the will-o'-the-wisp of second-Chamber reform.

7.22 pm

Mr. Andrew Rowe (Faversham and Mid-Kent): I have been astonished by the frequent references to the reform of this place—I thought we were perfect, and popularly perceived to be so. The serious question is: would any Government seek a reform of this place that made it a more effective brake on the Government? That is the crux of the matter. I do not believe that, beyond tinkering with various procedural matters, any Government of any hue will take seriously any attempt to reform this place to make it a more effective check on Government.

The hon. Member for Braintree (Mr. Hurst), who made an interesting and entertaining speech, advanced a rather strange proposition. He basically said that this place works so badly that, if we destroy the only mechanism—however frail—of checking our bad behaviour, we will be so frightened by our behaviour that we will be forced to reform ourselves. That is an interesting and an ingenious argument, but it did not carry me altogether.

I think that we have accepted rather too readily the proposition that the primary role of the House is the creation and scrutiny of legislation. Apart from anything else, I think we legislate far too much, and I wonder what proportion of each legislative programme is spent making good the mistakes of previous programmes rather than introducing new legislation. I believe the Government spend far too much time worrying about announcing their business and organising their timetable, rather than ensuring that a smaller body of legislation is scrutinised properly so that it does not have to be repealed two legislative programmes down the track.

I think that our job is also to call the Executive to account for the way in which they perform their functions. Above all, my constituents want me to chase the Government about the way in which they and their agencies deliver on policies and on legislation that has been passed. Most of my correspondents and my constituents are concerned about oppressiveness, inefficiency, bureaucratic delay and all the other elements of a creaking administrative system for which Ministers are responsible. I am not sure that we have effective mechanisms in this place to address those problems, but that is as much a part of the House's role as passing legislation.

I think also that our purpose—this is manifestly borne out by the interest of the media, which is notably lacking in most of what we do—is to be seen to debate the great issues of the day. It does not matter very much whether there is a vote at the end of a debate. This place is still seen to be the centre of national debate on issues such as genetically modified food, euthanasia or any other subject that seriously exercises the public. Indeed, it is one of the few areas of debate in this place that the media take the trouble to cover.

Mr. Garnier: Does my hon. Friend believe his concerns will be exacerbated by the removal of many debates from this Chamber to the Grand Committee Room? Will those debates be reported more widely than those that take place in this Chamber?

Mr. Rowe: It will be a shame if, in the mad rush to pass legislation through this place, debates that are central to the national interest are removed from this Chamber. I would rather see the legislative programme trimmed so that we may hold the main debates of our time in the House. For example, the media have been covering our debates on Kosovo—an area where the House has virtually no power—with meticulous care. In fact,

[Mr. Rowe]

much of the action has taken place under prerogative power in which the House has no role. However, our debates have been covered carefully.

I share the Mackay commission's view that if we are to have a second Chamber—I believe that we should—it must have its own programme. The commission is right about that. It is ridiculous that two Chambers that share the same building should engage in so little joint action. The two Chambers should co-operate much more when the new second Chamber is created. I agree with those who argue that the second Chamber should not include representatives of the Executive.

We must explore whether the traditional pattern of Chamber service is the only way to go. My right hon. Friend the Member for South Norfolk (Mr. MacGregor) painted an all too accurate picture of the disincentives to serving in this place, and it seems to me that those disincentives will operate with almost equal force in the second Chamber. I reckon that I am wholly unemployable in the outside world after 16 years in this place—I may have been unemployable when I escaped here in the first place, but that is certainly the case now. The same will be true of people who have served 15 years or so in the other place, so we need to think of ways to attract the lively specialists on whose expertise we all seem to be anxious to rely.

I wonder whether we could acknowledge how Members behave now and allow those who bring especial expertise mainly to attend the debates in which they can contribute that expertise. The practical difficulty with that would be voting. If there is an insistence, as there is in this place, that votes take place frequently, people who have been appointed because they are experts in social services or heavy engineering will feel inhibited about taking the job. If they could take part only in the debates to which they could make a specialist contribution, they might be delighted to do so, but if they had to turn out for regular votes, they might be reluctant to take the job. We need to examine that practical problem and to consider changes to the procedures for voting in the second Chamber.

I wonder whether there could be a much closer link between the second Chamber and the European Parliament. One of the most lamentable features of our parliamentary process is the fact that we have an almost entirely separate team with their own agenda and view of life who nominally represent us but have little contact with us. There is no time for that contact here, and our procedures do not make it easy to establish contact, but there is no reason why, in a revised second Chamber, it should not be possible, for example, for Members of the European Parliament to have a right of audience or to attend by invitation.

I remember vividly the meeting at which the Conservative party hierarchy decided that we would not allow Members of the European Parliament even to have a room at 32 Smith square because they were such undesirable, grossly overpaid characters and we were jealous of them and did not want them. That did enormous damage to the Conservative party because the divide between the Conservative team in the European Parliament and the rest of the party was unnecessarily exacerbated, and it led to a number of troubles on which I shall not dwell.

On the composition of the second Chamber, I am entirely in favour of direct elections. I agree with the right hon. Member for Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross (Mr. Maclennan) that we must have a different franchise and that the Members should be elected for a different period. The Mackay commission suggested multi-Member constituencies for at least part of the Chamber's constitution. That is a possible method, but we should have direct election of one sort or another. Like the American Senate, the second Chamber should be elected for a different period and in a different election year.

It is nonsense to suggest that direct elections give institutions equal authority. Authority is defined by the rules. For example, nobody believes that local authorities, which are directly elected, have power or influence equal to that of this place, because the powers of local authorities are defined by this place. If we define the powers of the second Chamber, there is no reason why we should create a Frankenstein's monster that will gobble us up sooner or later.

Finally, we should be much more imaginative and discover new ways of finding and electing the Members of the second Chamber. I shall give one example, which relates to an experiment so tentative that I mention it with care. The embryo United Kingdom youth Parliament is experimenting with the idea of having virtual members. Young people can be given a form of ID and can click onto the website and take part in debates. That may develop into a pool of young people whom one could not only ask for ideas about what might be on the agenda of a youth Parliament, but use as a source of potential candidates.

I understand that that is a radical suggestion, and I am aware that it may not work, but we are moving into a world in which there is an enormous amount of electronic interaction and in which information and choice are offered electronically. It might be worth at least considering the harnessing of that technology to the second Chamber because it is such a hassle to introduce even simple communication methods into this building of which we are all so fond and, rightly, proud—one must find an electricity socket and get someone to bring a slide projector or whatever one needs—that we are the laughing stock of the general public. The revised second Chamber might give us an opportunity at least to experiment with new devices.

7.36 pm

Dr. Tony Wright (Cannock Chase): I am about to make some high-minded and non-partisan points, so I shall begin with a thoroughly partisan point. The process of reforming the second Chamber—which is entirely to be welcomed, and I applaud the way in which the Government are making progress—has caused us to forget why we are doing it. The reason is that we have a second Chamber that, in its present form, is entirely indefensible.

There are people who doubt whether stage 2 will ever happen. We have heard hon. Members say with some authority that the transitional stage may become the final stage, which is a genuine fear. Nevertheless, we must not think of the current second Chamber as a faded antique that we simply have to touch up. It is fundamentally unsatisfactory. The idea that, at the end of this century, we still have a second Chamber composed in large part of an hereditary element is an outrage. We must tell ourselves that throughout today's rather high-minded discussion.

To remind myself and other hon. Members of that, I turned to the history of the other place, which I shall take a moment to recount. It involves the history of the Conservative and Liberal parties early in the century when they were merrily selling places in the upper Chamber. I shall give two examples before I move on to the high-minded part of my speech. The Bonar Law papers provide conclusive proof that honours were bartered for subscriptions to party funds in the early part of the century. When Bonar Law became Leader of the Conservative Opposition in 1911, he received a memo—

Mr. Grieve: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Dr. Wright: Not until I have made my point. Bonar Law received a memo from the party manager, Arthur Steel-Maitland, on the state of the party's organisation and finances. The document reported that the party had a nest egg of £300,000 and that

"a year's peerages are hypothecated".

Steel-Maitland went on to say that he hoped for an income of between £120,000 and £140,000 by the end of 1913.

Mr. Grieve: I am trying gently to encourage the hon. Gentleman to move on to the high-minded bit by reminding him that, although he is talking about the hereditary system of peerage at that time, there is a great deal of evidence that similar things have been happening under the appointed system of peers. I therefore fail to understand how he sees anything more legitimate about the appointed system.

Dr. Wright: I am interested in that intervention. If any hon. Member does not find the sale of peerages the most outrageous thing concerning the second Chamber this century, they do not quite understand what has been happening in that institution or, indeed, our political system. I shall, therefore, give the hon. Gentleman the second bit of low-mindedness, which refers to the Liberal party and Lloyd George's sale of the century: the 1922 birthday honours.

I refer particularly to the case of Sir Joseph Robinson, who was to be elevated to the peerage. It was discovered that he had been engaged in all kinds of shady business dealings in South Africa. Indeed, the South African Supreme Court asked him to repay £500,000 as a result. That caused some consternation; there was a debate in the House of Lords in which it was discussed how on earth a man of such a disreputable character could have been offered a peerage. It was announced in a further debate that Sir Joseph had written to the Prime Minister asking to be allowed to decline the peerage offered to him.

Sir Patrick Cormack: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Dr. Wright: Just a second.

Lloyd George's reply to Sir Joseph, accepting his decision to refuse a peerage, was delivered to Robinson at the Savoy hotel by an official of the National Liberal party. Sir Joseph misunderstood the message, reached for his cheque book and asked, "How much more?" I am afraid that that is the history of the institution in the early part of this century; that is the outrage and that is the motivation for ensuring its reform.

Sir Patrick Cormack: Although I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman, my constituency neighbour, for giving way, he is dredging up selective history—it is extremely selective—in order to advance a case about which nobody in this House is arguing. Nobody is arguing for the sale of peerages. The House of Lords Bill has gone through this House and to another place. We are not seeking to defend the automatic right of hereditary peers. The hon. Gentleman is walking on extremely thin ice because, not long ago, his own party gave peerages to a range of slightly odd characters, many of whom are on record as fairly major donors to it. What credit is he bringing on anybody by dredging up this rubbish?

Dr. Wright: I can understand why such issues should be unsettling, but it is important that we get the history right. Only the Labour party has not been involved in the sale of peerages. That is simply the case. If we want to bring the story slightly up to date—

Mr. Tyrie *rose*—

Dr. Wright: I shall finish answering the previous intervention. It was only in the previous general election campaign that the Conservative party defended the rights of hereditary peerages and argued for the status quo. We may argue about history and how right it is to refer to it when talking of reform, but the fact nevertheless remains that the Conservative party was so wrong on so much so recently concerning this issue that it is difficult to take it entirely seriously when it argues for the positions for which it seems to be arguing—although not terribly coherently.

Mr. Forth: The hon. Gentleman's party has been successful only because it has adopted so many Conservative party policies. If our policies were so wrong, why has his party been so successful?

Dr. Wright: I confine myself to the point at issue—*[Interruption.]* It is a rather important point at issue. I do not want to be detained by it, but the fact is that the Conservative party went into the election defending the hereditary peerage and opposing reform of the House of Lords, just as it opposed a freedom of information Act, devolution and a human rights Act—all things that are making our political system more democratic and decentralised.

Mr. Tyrie: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Dr. Wright: In order that I may endeavour to find some common ground, I would rather move on and give way later. Perhaps I should not have stirred things up, but there it is.

It is rare that we have an opportunity to think freshly about a political institution. We make modest reforms here and there, but, on this occasion, we are being asked to think freshly about what we want to do with a central institution of the political system. We can do so only if we are fairly clear about the issue—what we think are the difficulties and the problems to which a reformed institution might be the answer. Unless we do that, we shall get into all kinds of difficulties.

It is possible to invent a second Chamber that might be able to do all kinds of interesting things and might be composed in all kinds of interesting ways. We might

[Dr. Wright]

look around the world at other second Chambers and borrow this from there and that from here. In all sorts of ways, that would be mistaken because second Chambers are usually responses to particular situations in particular political systems. Sometimes, they are a way of trying to heal religious or regional differences, or of bringing the country together. We must be clear about the central problem; if we do not know what it is, we shall not know what reform might be the solution to it.

I agree very much with those who say that the central problem is that of an Executive who have too much power, and that the agencies and institutions that are there to check have too little. There is nothing original in saying that. It has been the standard critique of our political system for as long as I can remember. Twenty years ago, Lord Hailsham famously described our system as an elective dictatorship. He was right then; the analysis is true now.

Parties wax and wane on the issue depending on whether they are in government or in opposition. As we have seen in this debate, a party in opposition is terribly interested in issues of scrutiny and accountability—all things in which they had no interest when in government. Similarly, a party in government rapidly loses interest in issues of scrutiny and accountability in which it had great interest in opposition. I am afraid that that is one of the truisms of political life.

The central fact nevertheless remains that we have a peculiar system of what is often called strong government—a Government who have concentrated Executive power. Because we do not have a separation of powers, and because the Executive are drawn from the dominant party in the House of Commons, if we are not careful, we almost necessarily have a supine House of Commons. Necessarily, the House of Commons is controlled by the Executive.

That is our system and I see no immediate prospect of changing it. Such facets are characteristics of a system of strong government. I simply argue that if that is our system, and if we want it to continue, we must at least balance it with a system of strong accountability. We must have strong government on the one hand, because that gives coherence, direction and some crude political accountability. However, it will work satisfactorily and meet the tests of scrutiny and accountability only if it is matched by strong accountability. If this House of Commons cannot provide that by itself, it must be provided in a range of other ways, of which this House will be part.

We are creating a range of mechanisms that are beginning to help in achieving those objectives. Devolution helps to achieve them, by beginning to decentralise power. The Human Rights Act 1998 helps to achieve them, by beginning to give basic rights to citizens and against the Executive. I hope that a freedom of information Act also will help, by checking the Executive and making them less secretive. However, a reformed second Chamber also can help, by doing the general job of recognising that we have a system of strong Executive power that is tolerable only if it is always matched by institutions of strong accountability.

Mr. Grieve: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for making the interesting point on the Human Rights Act 1998—the introduction of which, as he may be aware, I broadly supported. What most worries me is that the Government, having passed that Act, are now chickening out in implementing it. Does that not bring us back to the point, which he himself made—that the longer Governments are in power, the more reluctant they are to initiate change? Therefore, on the broad issue of House of Lords reform, Opposition Members are anxious that, the further into this Parliament we go, the more apparent it is becoming that removing the hereditary principle is only an opportunity to substitute a purely appointed principle, which is equally bad.

Dr. Wright: I had planned on dealing with that point in a moment. For the moment, however, in my search for non-partisanship on the issue, I shall not be distracted from the argument that I was trying to develop.

If it is true that we need institutions of strong accountability, we shall have to create a second Chamber that—to put it in a nutshell—is neither a rival nor a replica of the first one. There is no question but that we have a primary Chamber in the House of Commons, and that is as it should be. This is the primary Chamber, which initiates, directs and governs. However, the virtues of having a primary, Executive-dominated Chamber are realised only if that Chamber is matched by other institutions that hold it to account. That is the real opportunity in reform of the second Chamber.

There is no great need to revisit the powers of a second Chamber. As other hon. Members have already said—I shall not go over the same ground—a reformed second Chamber will be more confident in using its powers. That will be the major change. A reformed second Chamber will have to be taken seriously, and conventions currently inhibiting the use of the powers of the unreformed second Chamber will not be sustainable. Those conventions will go, and the second Chamber will do the things that it should be doing.

In constitutional matters, however, there is a case for saying that the second Chamber should have a more developed role. We already give it a specific role in dealing with any attempt to extend the life of a Parliament; we already use it to provide that basic constitutional protection. However, I should go further and say that, if this place wants to do anything that offends basic constitutional rights—for example, if it were to seek systematically to erode the rights of Opposition—the second Chamber should act as a constitutional backstop. In any consequent conflict, a referendum could perhaps decide the issue. Nevertheless, I agree with those who have said that, in dealing with more usual situations, it might be more useful to develop routine anti-gridlock mechanisms.

We have to be able—having had a discussion about powers and activities—to address the underlying issue of legitimacy. People may ask of the second Chamber, "Who are these people? Why should they be taken seriously, listened to or be able to exercise a delaying power?" Unless we can answer that question in terms of legitimacy, ultimately, the second Chamber will be ineffective. Any fundamental reform will have to grapple with that fundamental point.

We shall, therefore, have to balance a range of often competing interests and issues, some of which have already been mentioned in the debate. We need to have

sufficient election to provide sufficient legitimacy—without which we shall not be able to answer the question of who those people in the second Chamber are. Nevertheless, I am absolutely clear that if we had simply a purely elective system, producing in the House of Lords a clone of the House of Commons, we shall only make the position worse rather than better.

I am equally clear that a party nominee, closed list system is substantially no different from a system of direct appointments. The closed list system may seem better and feel more legitimate, but—as the European elections show—that may not necessarily be so.

In thinking about those issues, I started by being rather keen on indirect election. Many years ago, I was very keen on ideas of functional representation—which, for much of this century, was a sub-current in British thought on those issues. I am not sure whether it was Sidney Webb or Winston Churchill who once talked about a "house of industry". Nevertheless, many people have explored the idea of trying to establish a system of functional representation alongside our system of direct representation.

The problem is that it is fiendishly difficult to work out how to create such a system. Therefore, in my own mind, reluctantly, I have had to move away from some of those fancy schemes of indirect and functional election, as I simply could not see how they would work in practice.

My conclusion—it is not an original one, but I reached it after trying to think my way through the issues—is that it would make sense to try to have the best of both worlds, and not the worse of two bad eggs. We want the merits of election without the demerits of total election, and we want the merits of appointment without the demerits of total appointment. Such a system necessarily entails an exploration of a mixed system that has to be—I phrase this carefully—predominantly elected, so that it must be taken seriously and passes the test of basic legitimacy. Beyond that, we need sufficient appointment to guarantee independence and expertise.

Mr. Gareth Thomas: I am following with great interest my hon. Friend's cogent points. However, is he not really advocating a system in which all Members of the second Chamber are legitimate, but in which some are more legitimate than others?

Dr. Wright: No. I think that we create legitimacy in different ways. We do not, for example, elect magistrates or juries. We have different ways of finding people to serve in public office. The challenge of finding a mixed system demands that we be reasonably imaginative and inventive.

We should not assume that one may have only election or only appointment—which is how the argument usually begins. I think that we can have not only the merits of election—thereby creating a predominantly elected House to reflect the party element of this place, and ensuring the legitimacy of election—but sufficient nomination to ensure that we create the non-party and independent element, and the range of expertise that we know that a second Chamber needs if it is not simply to be a replica of the House of Commons. That is the essence of the position at which I have arrived.

I shall detain the House only briefly with some further thoughts, some of which have already been expressed. If my argument is right, there is a case for not having Ministers in a second Chamber. If we are serious about strong accountability, the lures of office and patronage should be dispensed with. The Executive have grown large over the years and are well able to attend upon a second Chamber, too.

We need to attend to the problems of the bishops and the Law Lords. I hope that those issues will not be fudged because they are serious ones. The present position is unsatisfactory and now is the time to remedy it. The position of the Lord Chancellor is unsustainable. I speak as a former Parliamentary Private Secretary to the Lord Chancellor. Even in a system that loves anomalies, his position is an anomaly too far. Reform of the House of Lords should be the moment when we attend to that.

It is no small matter to find our way through in a manner that commands as much consensus and assent as possible. Considering the history of attempts to reform the second Chamber, we shall need enormous political will and substantial consensus to achieve it. The history of failed attempts to reform the House of Lords shows that we know how not to do it. We have spent much of the 20th century failing to reform the second Chamber. We need a combination of political will and broad consensus. I do not doubt the Government's political will to see the matter through. The challenge for all of us across the House is whether we have the imagination and determination to produce a solution that can be implemented and will stand the test of time.

8.2 pm

Mr. Andrew Tyrie (Chichester): I agree with the last remarks of the hon. Member for Cannock Chase (Dr. Wright), even if not with the first, but I shall not delay the House by taking issue with them, as I had momentarily intended to do.

I was walking across College green the other day when I bumped into a recently created life peer. I have known him for a long time and he has always been in favour of election to the second Chamber. He knew that I was, too. He buttonholed me and said, "Andrew, you are quite wrong about elections, you know. Quite wrong about having an elected House." "Why is that?" I asked. "Well," he replied, "if you are going to have any kind of proportional representation system, it means a list, which is basically an appointed system, because the party puts people on the list. That is no different, so I have decided I am against it." A large number of life peers are suddenly converting to the principle of nomination, having believed in the principle of election for many years. While the hereditaries were there they were safe, because there was a buffer zone between them and any threat of democracy, but they have twigged that the fresh air of democracy will be as much of a threat to life peers as the House of Lords Bill is to the hereditaries.

The life peers are a powerful vested interest—as powerful a vested interest as the hereditary peers have been over the years. The hereditaries are doing their best to cling on through the Cranborne-Weatherill amendment. It was only recently made public in an interview that Lord Cranborne negotiated a life peerage for himself as part of the deal to secure the amendment. He is in a Morton's fork. He will lose his right to sit because he sits by virtue of a writ of acceleration, so he is not ready even to be considered for election as part of the elected element in his scheme, but he does not have a life peerage either.

[Mr. Andrew Tyrie]

so he would have gone were it not for the special personal offer by the Prime Minister. That again shows the power of vested interests.

We, too, are a powerful vested interest.

Sir Patrick Cormack: Will my hon. Friend give way?

Mr. Tyrie: In a moment.

This House has a monopoly of democratic authority. If we gave any elected authority to the second Chamber, we would have to share it.

The most important vested interest is the Executive. The Government have a huge vested interest in ensuring that no impediments are put in the way of pushing through legislation. That has been true of all Executives. I am not making an assault on this Government. It has been the case since the 1911 reform.

The power of vested interests on this issue is huge. We are talking about a large number of Members of Parliament, the Executive, life peers and hereditary peers. If we are to secure democratic reform, we must take the issue away from the vested interests and give it to the electorate to decide.

Sir Patrick Cormack: I am sorry to take my hon. Friend back, but he made a categorical statement about Lord Cranborne. I do not know whether he is right, but is he sure that he knows precisely what took place in a private alleged conversation between Lord Cranborne and the Prime Minister?

Mr. Tyrie: It is rather tedious to go through all this, but I have a transcript of Lord Cranborne's interview on "Breakfast with Frost". Since my hon. Friend has raised the issue, I suppose that I shall have to read it out. He said:

> "Very kindly, the Government made it clear that . . . I could stay on if I wanted to as a life peer and I think it would be a bit churlish to turn that down—that general offer—particularly when there was a memorandum in the attached Bill making it clear they wanted to get rid of me. It is nice that they have changed their mind on that, too."

I think that that is a fairly clear answer to my hon. Friend.

This is our first debate on an issue that we should have debated two years ago—whether we want an upper House that is largely or wholly directly elected or one that is indirectly elected or wholly appointed. I have tried to answer that in various pieces that I have written over the past two years. It is worth going through some of the arguments briefly. Many of them have been mentioned today.

We need to be clear about whether we want a second Chamber. There are many unicameralists in the House, but most of them are not here today and their voice has scarcely been heard in the debate. I respect their views, but I find the arguments for bicameralism compelling. The Executive have become more powerful in recent decades. Many factors have contributed to that. The right hon. Member for Ashton-under-Lyne (Mr. Sheldon), who is no longer present, alluded to some of them, including the growth of the payroll vote, the professionalisation of Commons politics, the increase in the power of the Whips, the decline of the independent Back Bencher and the Executive's almost complete control over the Standing Orders of the House.

Our scrutiny of legislation is inadequate. After two years here, I am appalled by how shoddy legislation gets on to the statute book. I do not want to suggest that that has arisen only in the past two years. We also rely too much on the self-restraint of the Executive to protect our freedoms. A second Chamber can help to improve scrutiny and can act as a constitutional long stop.

Unicameralists may ask, "Why do we need the Lords to do those jobs? Why not reform the Commons?" That is a strong theoretical argument, but I do not think that such reforms will see the light of day. It is just possible that the Executive may be persuaded to support some improvement in the effectiveness of the Lords, but it is inconceivable that they will allow themselves to be restrained by radical reform of the Commons. My right hon. Friend the Member for South Norfolk (Mr. MacGregor) made a similar point, and I agree with him.

Mr. Letwin: Does my hon. Friend agree that there are grounds for a little more optimism than he is expressing in that, as an Opposition, we now have an opportunity to bind ourselves to reforms of this place which, when in government, we would be forced to implement?

Mr. Tyrie: That is a welcome suggestion, and I will now give greater thought to how the House of Commons might be reformed so that I can add to that debate.

As things stand, a second Chamber that works is the only way to tackle the problem of an over-mighty Executive.

Before moving on to consider election, we have to ask ourselves whether an interim House such as that being created by the first Bill or a largely appointed House—or something very similar—could do the job of scrutiny. I do not believe so. I believe that stage 1 reform will leave the lower House controlled by the Executive and the upper House effectively appointed by them. Abolishing the hereditaries achieves very little. It merely ensures that ancient patronage is replaced by modern patronage. What quality of scrutiny could we hope to obtain from that?

When it is created, it will be a Chamber of virtually no legitimacy. It will be no more than an interim rump, effectively on death row. If there is any trouble, the Government will be able to threaten to press the stage 2 button and eject as many as they want from the remainder of the Chamber.

I do not believe that tweaking a few dials such as creating an appointments committee, can create a modern appointed Chamber that will command widespread public respect. Without that public respect, no second Chamber would be able to exercise its powers. That is the central flaw in the argument of my right hon. Friend the Member for South Norfolk. He said that he wanted an increase in powers, but he did not want any increase in the moral authority of the Chamber in exercising them. He argued for some indirect election and some appointment. That would carry no more moral authority than we have now—in fact, it may carry less. By virtue merely of longevity, the existing House has come to serve some sort of constitutional role, although not a wholly adequate one. Once that has been removed—or even if there is only a moderate reform—what is left will have no moral authority.

The plain fact is that we live in a democratic age and only democracy can supply legitimacy. In the 21st century, parliamentary legitimacy must come largely from the ballot box. The public will find it increasingly unacceptable that parliamentarians should be created by a committee and given the power to legislate over them. Such a committee would amount to little more than a self-perpetuating oligarchy of the great and the good.

Sometimes I catch myself wondering why making that case should sound so radical. When I first raised this subject 18 months ago—shortly after I published my first article in *The Times* in favour of an elected House—an elderly colleague prodded me in the shoulder and said. "You're a republican." I can assure the House that I am not a republican and that I believe that it is entirely reasonable to envisage two parliamentary Chambers—directly elected or largely directly elected—while retaining the monarchy in its present form.

I believe that, only a few years ago, the vast majority of Labour party members, certainly those on the Front Bench, would have agreed that there should be more direct democracy in the House of Lords. Two years of being the Executive seems to have spawned a few doubts. After the election, there were still a few nods in the direction of democracy, but most of those have disappeared from Labour rhetoric.

I want to be slightly partisan in taking issue strongly with the Labour party's submission on reform of the House of Lords. It tells its own story. It is a profoundly anti-democratic document. It is replete with boxes of Labour party members' views—56 views are listed. I cannot find one Labour party member who is in favour of democracy—not one. On reading the boxes, one would believe that no one in Labour's grass roots believes in election. The press release that accompanied the document states:

"any proposals . . . for an elected second Chamber"—

that is proposals from the Conservative party—are

"naked opportunism masquerading as argument."

I find it appalling that the Labour party should produce a document suggesting that, if any Conservative such as myself stands here arguing for election—most of us have done it today—we should be accused of naked opportunism.

To read the Labour party document, one would believe that democracy was no way to achieve representation of the people. It calls for a "fully representative" Chamber of different interests and says that, above all, the House of Lords

"should be representative of the people as a whole."

That representation should be achieved not by election but by appointment. It is an outrageous abuse of language to talk about a representative Chamber that is wholly undemocratic. It is quite absurd.

Mr. Forth: I wonder whether my hon. Friend is flattered that the Labour party should assume that Conservatives should be opportunistic in arguing for democracy. That means that the Labour party accepts that we would be the gainers from any democratic process. I find that flattering and encouraging.

Mr. Tyrie: My right hon. Friend makes his point very well. I do not believe that two years, or even five or eight years, ago we would have seen a document such as this from the Labour party. It is deeply regrettable.

Mr. Grieve: Does my hon. Friend agree that one or two of the contributions from some Labour Members today mark an evolutionary stage in Labour party thought? The hon. Member for Cannock Chase (Dr. Wright) was fascinated by the idea of corporatist elected Chamber, but we have a proposal for a corporatist Chamber that is not elected but appointed.

Mr. Tyrie: I agree.

I have got to know quite a large number of Labour Members who strongly support direct elections and I do not want to suggest that I am portraying all Labour Members in that light—far from it. I have had some fascinating conversations with people who follow pretty much the same line of argument as I, in favour of a largely or wholly directly elected Chamber.

What is more, although it is well concealed, the Labour party document rules out a second Chamber of mixed composition. It is worth bearing that in mind. I notice that one Labour Member is frowning, so I shall read the relevant passage. It says:

"Its Members should have equal standing and there should be no opportunity for some to assert that they have a greater legitimacy than others."

That can only mean that those who might have legitimacy as a result of being elected cannot sit alongside those who have been appointed. I should be interested if the Minister could enlighten me on what that sentence means, if it is anything other than my interpretation.

So where do we stand? The Executive seem to be determined to prevent even a whiff of democracy in a reformed second Chamber. They have issued a Labour party document that calls for a wholly appointed House, but they do not have the courage to say that that is what the document means.

Does democracy stand any chance at all? I have to say that I am not very optimistic, and I share the views of my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Sleaford and North Hykeham (Mr. Hogg) on that. I am sure that the royal commission was originally appointed with the idea of trying to kick the issue into the long grass. None the less, there are two sources of hope. One is the royal commission, which might surprise us by embracing democracy. The other is the existing House of Lords which might force commitments out of the Government with the passage of the stage 1 Bill.

On the royal commission, I am hoping for the best but fearing the worst. I am most impressed with the way in which its members are going about their work and I have already given evidence to them in writing and orally.

It is worth looking briefly at the composition of the royal commission. Some of its members have expressed quite clear views about an elected House. Only recently,

[Mr. Tyrie]

Lord Wakeham was reported as being sceptical about election. That was in *The Times* earlier this year. The Bishop of Oxford is completely against

"even a partially elected element"

in the second Chamber, as he made clear in a speech just under a year ago. I do not know the views of Sir Michael Wheeler Booth and Anthony King. Professor Oliver will almost certainly be in favour of some form of election.

I was also greatly heartened by some typically erudite remarks on the danger of appointed Houses from Lord Butler, the former Cabinet Secretary, when he quoted Gibbon's "Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire". Gibbon wrote of Augustus:

"The principles of a free constitution are irrevocably lost when the legislative power is nominated by the Executive".

Lord Butler went on to say:

"I think it of the highest importance, in the absence of hereditary Peers, for the Royal Commission to find a way in which to select Members of your Lordships' House which does not depend solely on the patronage of the Executive".—[*Official Report, House of Lords*, 25 November 1998; Vol. 595, c. 42.]

Of course he has had the benefit of seeing successive Executives exercising that power of patronage and I wonder whether that had any influence on his decision to express that view. I am not overly optimistic about the royal commission, but I am not yet overly pessimistic.

The other hope—which is a genuine one and not to be wholly ignored—is the possibility that the House of Lords itself in its present form might yet force commitments from the Government for direct democracy. The hereditary peers can do a great deal before they depart. They can and should force through two important amendments. First, they could demand a referendum. The Lords could demand that, whatever the content of stage 2, the Government should be required to hold a referendum on their stage 2 proposals. They should be forced to let the people decide.

Many Opposition Members, including me, are not particularly attracted to referendums as a matter of principle, but the Government have always said that they believe in them. If the Government believe that the end point of this reform should be an appointed upper House, as the Labour party's submission so clearly elucidates, let them take that issue to the people. They have had referendums on Scotland, Wales, Northern Ireland and London. Indeed, the White Paper refers to them glowingly. They have promised us referendums on economic and monetary union, and proportional representation.

In the local government White Paper, the Government promise to allow local authorities to hold referendums. If local authorities are to be allowed to hold referendums on whether to charge for home helps, what possible argument can the Government have against giving people a chance to decide something as fundamental as the reform of Parliament? Why cannot the people be given a chance to endorse the biggest change in the legislature this century?

The second amendment that the Lords could pass, which would add pressure for direct election, is a democratic one—a clause that would force the Government to bring forward a democratic stage 2 within, say, three years of the passage of the stage 1 Bill. That would open up the debate on democracy in the House and in the country in a big way.

If they did that, the 750 hereditary peers who are threatened by the stage 1 Bill would have an opportunity to be remembered not as a group who were clinging on to what the wider public consider unacceptable privileges in a democratic age, but as the people who brought the Executive to accept some constitutional restraint through election. They could be remembered as the people who checked the Government and reduced the risk that we could be left floundering with unicameralism in all but name, which is what the stage 1 Bill will bequeath us.

So we must hope for the best from their lordships and from the royal commission, but nobody should underestimate the power of the forces acting against democracy.

I believe that all of us who believe in an elected House and a largely or fully elected second Chamber should go out and try to make the case to a wider public. If the Executive were forced to go beyond Westminster, where they reign supreme, and talk to the people directly and explain that they intended to impose a largely or wholly appointed second Chamber, I have no doubt that they would soon produce proposals for a largely or wholly elected second Chamber.

8.26 pm

Mr. Bill Rammell (Harlow): I welcome the opportunity to participate in a thoughtful debate. I used to be sceptical about the passion that people brought to constitutional issues, but, having attended all the Committee sittings on the Bill and the two days of debate on Second Reading and participated in numerous discussions, I am becoming as obsessive about the issue as many others. It is a bit like becoming a train spotter late in life. I apologise to any of my constituents who happen to be train spotters.

It is an interesting debate and we should not underestimate the degree of historic change that we are witnessing. I should like to follow some of the comments of my hon. Friend the Member for Cannock Chase (Dr. Wright). We are ending the indefensible—people voting in one of our Houses of Parliament simply on the basis of the family into which they were born. We are ending the deformity of one of our Houses of Parliament, whereby its members come predominantly from one background and from one class with one set of beliefs and one set of values, and certainly support one political party. Many Opposition Members underestimate the power of that criticism of the current make-up of the House of Lords and the resentment that many people feel about it.

We are also rightly ending the party political abuse of the second Chamber. It is not about independence and detachment, but about the naked abuse of party political power. Two thirds of peers who take a party Whip in the House of Lords take the Conservative Whip. It is not about independence, scrutiny and a check on the Executive; it is and has been for centuries about the domination of the second Chamber by Conservative peers who have used their power to frustrate the will of democratically elected Labour Governments.

It is also about ending unrepresentativeness. We will have a debate about whether representativeness can be achieved solely by dint of election, but the current make-up of the House of Lords, with only 2.5 per cent. of its members being women and very few coming from ethnic minority backgrounds, presents a real problem. I

hope that the process that we have set in train will bring that to an end. It is worth underlining what we are doing. We are making a change that is long overdue and demonstrates the radical constitutional nature of the Government.

Before I talk in detail about my views on the form and composition of the new Chamber, it is worth dealing with some of the criticisms from Conservative Members. I was interested to hear the right hon. and learned Member for Sleaford and North Hykeham (Mr. Hogg) say that the only positions in public life that are legitimate in the eyes of the public are those that result from direct election. Despite that sincerely held view, elected office is probably held in lower esteem than it has been at any time in recent memory. Therefore, it is at least worth considering that elections—although crucial to the make-up of the House of Commons—are not a panacea and are not appropriate to every nook and cranny of our constitutional settlement.

Some of the comments concerning the domination of this place by the Executive have been interesting. It is at least fair to say that those concerns were not voiced fully by Conservative Members of Parliament when their party was in power. Perhaps opposition releases people from the constraints of office and allows them to think more liberally.

I was interested to hear the right hon. and learned Member for Sleaford and North Hykeham say that he did his duties as a Whip reluctantly—presumably, he told people that what he was doing was hurting him far more than them. Conservative Members would know better than I. However, there are concerns about domination by the Executive, but these come when one party has a large majority.

It is interesting to reflect that in three of the previous four general elections, one party has been elected with a majority of more than 100. It is in those circumstances that concerns about domination by the Executive come to the fore. We could resolve that by moving to a fairer voting system in which views are more fairly represented. However, there are different ways of dealing with the matter rather than by simply looking to elect a second Chamber. That is an answer to a question that is not being posed.

My right hon. Friend the Member for Ashton-under-Lyne (Mr. Sheldon) and Conservative Members referred to the need for an alternative career structure within this House. That is a legitimate point which could deal with some of the concerns and tensions about domination by the Executive. However, I do not think that that is in any way dependent on reform of a second Chamber. Such ideas should be debated in any case.

I was interested in the claim made by a number of Conservative Members that, if the Government had simply brought forward the matter immediately after the general election and set up the royal commission at that stage, we could have had consensus on a reformed second Chamber. I hope that Conservative Members will forgive my scepticism about that. The debate about the nature of the House of Lords has been going on for 88 years. In the 18 years in which the Conservatives were in power, they never once proposed any detailed substantive reform for the House of Lords. I do not believe that, immediately following the general election, the Conservative party was serious about reform.

Conservative Members referred to the old chestnut that the Government should have brought forward the two-stage reform in one stage. That is a flawed argument. Over the past 88 years, Members of the Conservative party have claimed to support House of Lords reform, but said that they needed to see the endgame before they could commit themselves. The lack of agreement on the endgame is always what thwarts the process of reform, so I do not believe that that argument carries much credence.

I wish to refer to what kind of second Chamber we want, what its functions should be, how it should be established, what its role and procedures should be and its relationship to this House. The first point, alluded to by my hon. Friend the Member for Braintree (Mr. Hurst), was whether we should have a second Chamber at all. I listened with interest to my hon. Friend and, on balance, I think that we need a second Chamber. We need within our constitutional settlement the possibility of asking the Government to think again.

We need a second Chamber to allow us to bring in the outside expertise that we do not necessarily get through bringing in professional politicians. We need a second Chamber in which it is possible to get greater detachment and independence from the party Whips—my apologies to my hon. Friend the Member for Hyndburn (Mr. Pope) on the Front Bench—which would come from the second Chamber not having the vast majority of its Members relying for their living on their seat within that House. We certainly need a second Chamber to check abuse of power by the Executive.

Fundamentally—this concern was not addressed by my hon. Friend the Member for Braintree—we need a second Chamber as the ultimate guarantor to stop this House extending its term of office and postponing or abolishing elections.

Having dealt with these issues, the key question becomes one of the composition of the second Chamber. As someone who believes that the hereditary principle is an abomination—a view that I have held all my political life, as has my party—my instinctive reaction is that the answer should be direct elections. I hope now to set out my scepticism about that. The more I have become involved in the process, the greater my concern has been about direct elections to the second Chamber.

Those concerns stem from fact that I do not want the pre-eminence and superiority of this House to be challenged. It is in this House that the Government are accountable. It is in this House that we are the primary legislators. I do not want to undermine that. My concern with the current status of the House of Lords is that democratically elected Governments of the left have had their programmes obstructed by the undemocratic nature of the House of Lords.

I do not want to throw the baby out with the bath water and have a situation where democratically elected Governments of the left find that their legitimate mandate is thwarted by a second Chamber with an equally powerful electoral mandate which seeks to frustrate the legitimate aspirations of the Government as stated in their manifesto.

Mr. Grieve: Why should those aspirations be frustrated if there is an elected second Chamber? For instance, it might be that, two years into the elected period of the Government—when their mandate is becoming a

[Mr. Grieve]

little stale—fresh Members of the upper House may say not that they wish to thwart that mandate, but that they disagree with some aspects of it and wish to make the Government think again by exercising to the full their powers under the Parliament Acts. What is the matter with that?

Mr. Rammell: The hon. Gentleman underlines one of my key concerns: that elections to the other place would be conducted in mid term and people elected with a fresh mandate would argue, however small the proportion of elected Members, that their mandate was stronger than the Government's. We would be in danger of constant gridlock and the blocking of the legitimate mandate won by a Government in a general election.

Mr. Andrew Mackinlay (Thurrock): The important element of the elections is that they would be rotational. If a third retired at each fixed-term House of Lords election, every Member would have legitimacy to cause reflection, but there would not be a mandate to block completely the will of the House of Commons, whose view must ultimately prevail. There would never be the snapshot of time that gives us in the House of Commons a mandate. Members of the other place would never be able to claim supremacy, although each Member would have legitimacy.

Mr. Rammell: We would need to think through the detail. Even if only a third were elected at any one time, clearly there would be others in that House under the same party label who would draw inspiration and encouragement from the electoral mandate that that third of the House got. I am not ruling out elections, perhaps for a proportion of Members, in all circumstances, but I am highlighting the fact that we need to think long and hard before automatically and instinctively responding to the inadequacies of the current make-up of the House of Lords by replacing it with an elected second Chamber. Before we knew where we were, we would have constitutional gridlock between the two Houses and the Government of the day, democratically elected with a significant mandate, would be unable to implement their programme beyond a period of two years.

Mr. Savidge: As my hon. Friend the Member for Stoke-on-Trent, Central (Mr. Fisher) said, if the legislation says that the other House can only delay and cannot create gridlock, there is a perfectly good reason why a Government, who no longer have the support of the country should be made to think again.

Mr. Rammell: As we all know, the power of delay can be extremely significant and can affect the rest of a Government's legislative programme.

We also need to consider what is the role of a second Chamber in relation to this Chamber. This is where we hold the Government to account and where we are the primary instigators of legislation. Conservative Members may say that that is not the situation at present, and perhaps that is one of the problems with the current constitutional set-up, but I do not think that the right response is necessarily direct elections.

The role of the second Chamber should be tightly circumscribed. It should be a constitutional long stop, checking abuse and asking this place to think again. I am not convinced that to carry out that role one must necessarily be elected. We do not have a political culture and system in which every form of public office in every nook and cranny of our constitution is elected. We do not elect the dog catcher and we do not elect the judiciary. We should pause for thought.

Where is the enthusiasm for elections among the electorate? Perhaps my experience of the current European parliamentary election campaign has been unique, but I do not detect massive enthusiasm in the electorate for voting in local or European elections. If we add a further set of elections for a reformed second Chamber, we may find that people lose interest more and more and the turnout becomes lower, which would not advance anybody's cause.

Mr. Tyrie: I strongly agree that there is a risk of voter fatigue. Might not a way round that be to hold the elections at the same time as general elections?

Mr. Rammell: That is one possible solution and it would certainly deal with the concern about elections taking place in mid term. I am not certain that the answer to the current inadequacies of the House of Lords is to move to a wholesale system of direct elections.

The concerns that I am voicing have been expressed consistently every time the House has considered these issues. The Brice conference in 1917–18, set up by Lloyd George, rejected the option of a directly elected second Chamber on the ground that such a Chamber would inevitably become a rival to the House of Commons. That same concern was expressed when the 1945–51 Labour Government considered the issues in 1948, and in 1968, when my right hon. Friend the Member for Ashton-under-Lyne was involved in the campaign, and people such as Michael Foot voiced their reservations from a very democratic perspective.

If the second Chamber is not to be wholly elected, what should its composition be? There are certainly strong arguments for reflecting the new constitutional settlement, with representatives from the Scottish Parliament, the Welsh Assembly, the Northern Ireland Assembly, once it is established, and the English regions. Those people would be there to ensure that the overall constitutional settlement was taken into account.

There is also a strong case for Members of the European Parliament to be represented—*[Interruption.]* It is hardly surprising that that idea causes concern on the Conservative Benches. We should remember that 25 per cent. of our laws, and a much higher proportion of our business legislation, are derived from Europe, and we need to ensure that the interlocking between this place and the European Parliament, and our scrutiny of European legislation, take place on an informed basis. I do not think that anyone either in this House or the other place could say that that happens at the moment.

Mr. Grieve: I am wondering whether we shall hear anything from the hon. Gentleman about functional constituencies, which have been touted by the hon. Members for Leominster (Mr. Temple-Morris) and for Cannock Chase (Dr. Wright). Those would be

corporatist—and is it not as corporatist to include, as of right, Members of the European Parliament, the Scottish Parliament or the Welsh Assembly, as it would be to include groups from industry, the law, the trade unions, the medical profession and so on?

Mr. Rammell: If that is done on a limited basis, I am not sure that, in view of the role that we are prescribing for the second Chamber, it would necessarily be a bad thing. There is at least a case to be made for a small element of representation from sectional interests, whether those be trade unionists, business people, doctors, teachers or whatever. We should explore the idea.

We also need to think long and hard about religious representation. Religious belief is part of the fabric of our society, and nobody suggests that the Church of England should be removed from the second Chamber. Britain today is a multi-ethnic, multicultural and multi-religious society, and it is important that, without the position of the Church of England being undermined, those views are represented in the second Chamber.

Inevitably, within the kind of set-up that I envisage, there will be a process of appointment. That is not necessarily wrong, so long as appointments are made openly and fairly. The move towards an independent appointments commission is important, as is the fact that the Prime Minister has voluntarily given up some powers of patronage.

We need to go further. If there are to be processes of appointment, political parties need to be far more open about how people can come forward and seek nomination for peerages or places in the second Chamber. We should advertise to tell people how to go about seeking a nomination; publicising the process will be important.

The view that nomination is wrong in all circumstances is not shared by most people, especially if the job is not to be primarily one of initiating legislation. That is not a role that we seek for the second Chamber. Despite the fact that this is one of the criticisms most frequently made, nomination does not necessarily mean domination by the Executive, especially as the Government, rightly, have said that no one political party will have a majority in the second Chamber.

No evidence has been produced to suggest that nominated peers, once established, are supine creatures who automatically do the will of their political parties. Let us take some examples of recently created life peers from both parties. No one could plausibly argue that the likes of Lord Hattersley, Lord Shore and Lord Tebbit are there as tame party poodles to carry out the will of the political parties that appointed them.

Under the current system of appointment, once people are appointed they are not accountable to the person or party that put them there—a view that the history of life peers in the House of Lords supports.

I turn now to some of my concerns about the relationship between the two Chambers after the reforms have been instituted. I am worried that too much of what we do happens by convention, which does not always work. Reference has been made to the Salisbury convention, but, in debates on the European Parliamentary Elections Bill, the House of Lords sailed close to the wind in terms of challenging that convention. The Conservative peer Lord Kingsland said recently that abolition of hereditary peers was a solution to a problem that he did not recognise. He considered that the Opposition would be entitled to think most carefully about whether the Salisbury convention applied to that Bill.

So, regardless of what 13.5 million people voted for in the Labour manifesto—the biggest Labour party landslide this century—Lord Kingsland considered that the gentlemen's agreement that is the Salisbury convention did not apply. I argue that the other gentlemen's agreements that police the relationship between this House and the House of Lords should not be allowed to continue.

Mr. Tyrie: The primary purpose of the Salisbury convention, as it was adopted after the war, was to deal with the disparity and imbalance between the two parties. The Government intend to impose parity in the interim House: does the hon. Gentleman think that the Salisbury convention should fall, or does he think that there should be a doctrine of the manifesto to trigger an arrangement similar to the convention and thus ensure that the Government always achieve what is contained in their manifesto?

Mr. Rammell: I think that there should be a doctrine of the manifesto. I was interested to hear a Conservative Member earlier pooh-poohing the notion that what appears in a manifesto is of any interest to politicians or the people who elect them. That attitude risks losing something that is unique about our democratic process. It is important that a party that gets a majority in this House has the opportunity to put into practice what is contained in its election manifesto. Even if there were parity between the parties in a reformed second Chamber, we would need firmer rules to ensure that what is in a manifesto can prevail.

I am also worried about the lack of an effective timetable in the other place. I am aware that if the second Chamber is allowed to have the power of delay, the Government cannot introduce a guillotine and thus remove that right. However, that power of delay must be circumscribed and confined, so that the rest of the legislative programme is not blocked, as has happened often in the past. In short, we need a new constitutional settlement to govern the relationship between this House and the House of Lords.

Finally, although there will be a debate about the form of the second Chamber and about how far elections should play a part in it, we need a second Chamber that really works in its limited role. The example of the Bill that became the War Crimes Act 1991 was mentioned earlier. That was a classic example of a proposal from the Government of the day that the second Chamber should have been able to challenge legitimately. It was a deeply emotive issue, but it was not a manifesto commitment and there were party divides on both sides of the House. One would have thought that the age and experience of Members of the second Chamber put them in a better position to form a judgment on the matter, but the second Chamber was flawed and seen to be illegitimate as a result of the involvement of hereditary peers, and the Government of the day simply brushed it aside by invoking the Parliament Acts.

If, in limited circumstances, the second Chamber is to have the right to challenge the will of this House, it must have legitimacy, openness and fairness in its composition

[Mr. Rammell]

that allows it to be respected and listened to by the public and by the House of Commons. I hope that we can achieve that in future debates as the legislation is introduced.

8.54 pm

Mr. Eric Forth (Bromley and Chislehurst): The trouble with debates such as this is that it is easy for Members to agree with superficially attractive propositions. We have heard much of that tonight. There has been near unanimity on some simple propositions, most obviously the idea that it is essential to our political system to have a second Chamber that provides an effective check on and scrutiny of the House of Commons. One or two unicameralists among us did not share that view, but there has been widespread agreement that a second Chamber should scrutinise legislation and hold the Government to account.

Another view widely, but easily, shared is that the second Chamber should be legitimate and accountable. Such words are widely used and it comforts politicians to be able to say them. However, the consensus goes no further. As soon as we have to put hard substance around those words, it becomes more difficult to reach agreement. I find it difficult to understand how Labour Members such as the hon. Member for Harlow (Mr. Rammell) can stress accountability and democracy, yet support an appointed second Chamber.

In fairness, I should say that some braver spirits on the Labour Benches have not done that. The hon. Member for Stoke-on-Trent, Central (Mr. Fisher) robustly supported an elected Chamber, as I do. It is difficult to understand how anyone, whether in my own party or in any other, can, in an era of allegedly open government, democracy, accountability and political legitimacy—all the things to which we say we subscribe—can say that the second Chamber of the legislature should be largely or even wholly appointed. That is unconscionable.

Few Members—the hon. Member for Leominster (Mr. Temple-Morris) is an exception—mentioned whether appointed legislators in another Chamber should have a fixed term or serve for life. The hon. Gentleman, in what was almost a throwaway remark, said that they should serve for life. That begs some interesting questions about how the composition of the Chamber could ever change to reflect changing circumstances. Presumably, it would have to happen by attrition if the number in the Chamber were to be limited. Alternatively, there might be no limit on the number, in which case we could return quickly to something perilously similar to the present arrangement.

Mr. Rowe: Is there not a tremendous danger that people would be reluctant to appoint people of other than a considerable age? What the legislature needs above all is more young people.

Mr. Forth: I was with my hon. Friend until his final words. I do not share the obsession with youth. When I had an element of responsibility for young people during the previous Government I was frequently told that our youth were our future. When I looked at some of them, I thought, "My God, I hope not", and I cannot agree with my hon. Friend.

In fact, I am tempted by the idea that there should be a higher age limit on eligibility for the second Chamber so that we could do the opposite of what my hon. Friend suggests, ensuring that the upper Chamber would be, by definition, mature and experienced and that its Members could not spend too long in it. That would provide an automatic renewal mechanism whether the Chamber was appointed or, as I would prefer, elected.

An appointment system raises real difficulties. Quite apart from lack of legitimacy and accountability, difficulties arise over numbers, the variability of the composition when circumstances change and the removal of Members who are no longer appropriate. There is also the vexed question—hardly covered in our debate, but one of the key considerations before us—of who would do the appointing, and who would appoint those who do the appointing, and who would appoint them. Despite the claims of Labour Members who are loyal to their Prime Minister, how could we guarantee that the Prime Minister would—as he has said he would—stand aside and allow the process to be non-political? I do not believe that and I suspect that even many Labour Members do not. For an appointed Chamber to be valid, we would have to be satisfied that appointments would be free of the patronage that has so often been mentioned tonight. Like so many of my hon. Friends, I readily argue for an elected second Chamber. To my mind, that is the only approach that we can countenance at this stage in our political history and constitutional development.

The second Chamber should be composed of a multiple of 87 Members. That number was not chosen at random, as cognoscenti will understand. We have a ready-made political map of 87 constituencies. They happen to be European constituencies, I might add sotto voce, but, for the purpose of my proposal, I will accept that. We could use that map almost immediately without needing a boundary commission. I would prefer a small Chamber, but I would be prepared to accept twice or even three times that number if that was deemed to be appropriate to the Chamber's functions.

I suggest long terms for Members of the Chamber, probably nine or 12 years, to give them some independence of the Government. That is important. A third should be elected every two or three years or perhaps a bit longer to make the Chamber responsive to the electorate and changes in their views and to make it a distinctive political entity with a validity distinct from that of the House of Commons and the Government.

As many hon. Members have argued, there must be no Ministers in the upper House, which would therefore become genuinely independent of the Government. It would reflect the electorate's views and gain legitimacy and accountability. There would be no power of patronage in the upper House because the Government would not determine what happened there. Because Members had long terms of office, they could act genuinely independently. We could thus meet many of the requirements that many hon. Members say that they seek—but often shrink from—in a revised second Chamber. I do not shrink from the implications of saying that the Chamber should be powerful because I want it properly to scrutinise and hold to account the Government of the day.

Some colleagues may know that I spend a lot of time in the Chamber. I am one of those eccentrics who attends on Fridays. Not everyone welcomes that, but I believe that

I can therefore say that I do my best to be a good Member of this House. That does not mean that I have blind faith in it or in the idea that everything begins and ends here. Nor do I accept without criticism the argument about the primacy of the House of Commons. I regret what I am about to say, but it is true. Many of those Members who talk about this House's primacy do not come here to support it. The thin attendance at this debate is an example, as is the pathetically small attendance on Fridays and on many other occasions. All the talk about the House's vital importance is regrettably not borne out by the actions of its Members.

Mr. Hogg: I very much agree with what my right hon. Friend says. With regard to Fridays, does he accept that private Members' Bills often diminish the rights of individuals to a marked extent? An obvious example was the attempt to prohibit foxhunting; another example is the Fur Farming (Prohibition) Bill. However, as a general rule, the House is not well attended on the occasions when those measures are discussed—albeit that their consequence is greatly to diminish individual liberty.

Mr. Forth: I share the view of my right hon. and learned Friend and I am grateful to him for making that point. Many private Members' Bills would limit considerably the powers of individuals, or would introduce a large degree of regulation. However, few Members of the House turn up voluntarily to participate in the debates on those measures.

I do not necessarily agree with those who say that the House is so wonderful that it must never be challenged. I am prepared to countenance an elected upper House with enormous powers and ability to challenge what happens in the House of Commons. As so many hon. Members have pointed out, the real difficulty and the sadness about the modern House of Commons is that it is so much in the total control of the Executive of the day. That cannot be changed in the foreseeable future, so we owe it to the electorate to provide them with the assurance that there will be a second Chamber that can effectively challenge the Executive and hold them to account, in a way that I regret that the House of Commons rarely, if ever, now demonstrates that it is capable of doing.

Those are my arguments and, in view of the time, I shall draw them to a close. To complete them, I join the few Members who have highlighted the judicial role currently played by the House of Lords. That role can be, and should be, swept aside, along with the reforms that we are considering. We should have a supreme court, modelled closely on the one that has played such a distinguished role in the development of the United States throughout almost its entire history. The US Supreme Court is one of the most fascinating political institutions of the past 200 years; its role has been dramatic and remarkable. We would do well to emulate that court. If, as I suggest, we establish a wholly elected, accountable second Chamber, we should sweep away the unnecessary representation of the Church and other interests—I should be happy if that were gone, and the sooner the better. I should also be happy to see the judicial role of the upper Chamber brought to an end and replaced by a supreme court, modelled closely on that of the United States and able to play a similar role.

I am glad that the proposals that I have briefly outlined are shared by many of my colleagues. I hope that they find increasing support from Labour Members.

9.8 pm

Mr. Gareth Thomas (Clwyd, West): The debate has been genuinely interesting. It has helped me to formulate my views—albeit tentative ones—on a subject that raises difficult issues, especially when one deals with the vexed question whether the second Chamber should be elected or nominated. I had thought that I was reasonably knowledgeable on the subject, but, having heard the wide range of rather good-quality contributions, it is clear to me that I must bow to the greater specialist knowledge of several hon. Members.

I am a relatively new Member, having been elected in 1997. I represent a Welsh constituency and am committed to Welsh devolution. I am aware that there is a wide programme of constitutional reform and that reform of the second Chamber also has to embrace the reforms in that programme. I welcome the fact that a royal commission has been appointed and I expect it to produce a comprehensive and well-argued report.

The first of my conclusions is that there is a need for a second Chamber. I do not accept the rather intriguing argument employed by my hon. Friend the Member for Braintree (Mr. Hurst). However, I do accept the arguments of my hon. Friend the Member for Cannock Chase (Dr. Wright). A second Chamber is a reflection of what is required in a particular country. In our jurisdiction, there is a strong Executive and a strong first Chamber—the elected Chamber. As a corrective to an over-mighty Executive, it is essential to have a second Chamber charged with the tasks of revising legislation and complementing the scrutiny role of the elected Chamber by bringing to bear specialised knowledge.

That is my starting point. Given the public demand for strong and accountable government exercised through the House of Commons, it is unrealistic to expect this Chamber to do all that is required to produce good-quality legislation. Unfortunately, there have been many examples of poor legislation, which, in themselves, provide ample justification for having a second, revising Chamber. I make no apologies for taking a somewhat minimalist view, for my second conclusion is that there is no strongly rooted case for revising the essential roles of the second Chamber. I disagree with the analysis of the right hon. and learned Member for Sleaford and North Hykeham (Mr. Hogg), who would like the role of the second Chamber to be greatly expanded.

I agree that there is an inherent problem in having an elected second Chamber that could contest the will of our elected Chamber, but my third conclusion is that there must be a strong independent element in any second Chamber. Although I was almost persuaded by my hon. Friend the Member for Stoke-on-Trent, Central (Mr. Fisher), who offered an extremely good analysis of why, in the latter half of the 20th century, we must conclude that legitimacy is normally derived from the ballot box, I take the view that, to preserve the independence of the second Chamber and to ensure that it effectively fulfils its revising and scrutiny roles, it is necessary for it to consist of a wide range of people who reflect different experiences. I am sceptical that the conventional electoral system, which involves people working their way through conventional political parties, would produce the sort of people we want in the second Chamber.

[Mr. Gareth Thomas]

In addition, like my hon. Friend the Member for Harlow (Mr. Rammell), I am concerned that the increased number of elections for different levels of government has resulted in voter fatigue. If the second Chamber is to have a limited role, which I would support, turnout in elections for it might be drastically low, which would undermine its legitimacy. The best way to ensure that we have an independent second Chamber is to have an appointments commission that is seen to be dispassionate, independent and detached from the Executive. Like the right hon. Member for Bromley and Chislehurst (Mr. Forth), I hope the Minister will tell us more about how the Government propose to give teeth to such a commission.

In Wales and Scotland, there has been debate about whether there should be territorial representation in the second Chamber. I support the view expressed many years ago in the Kilbrandon report that that would be undesirable. I am in favour of a broad spread of geographical representation, but not in any formalised way, because that might lead to confusion about the functions of the House of Lords—incidentally, I see no reason why its name should be changed.

A balance must be struck between, on the one hand, tradition and stability and, on the other, the need to create a second Chamber that is more representative and fulfils its role more effectively. Provided that we can deal with the overriding objection to the current system—that there is an in-built Conservative majority in the House of Lords—I would feel comfortable with a nominated House of Lords, so long as the system for nominations was truly detached and dispassionate and ensured good-quality, independent representation.

9.15 pm

Mr. Dominic Grieve (Beaconsfield): I shall have to be brief and I have only myself to blame if I am called last. I must apologise to the House for having missed the opening speeches. The reason, I must confide to the House, is that I was attempting to maintain my independence by carrying out some of my professional duties instead of attending the House, although I had hopes that I might be able to get here slightly earlier than I did. Perhaps I am paying the penalty for that, although I was reassured to hear several Labour Members suggest that it was not necessarily a bad thing that I should have some independent interests.

I start from the premise that I am a great believer in parliamentary democracy. That does not mean that I am a believer in pure democracy, because only the ancient Athenians had pure democracy and they tended to chop off the heads of members of the Executive whom they had democratically mandated at the end of each term. Parliamentary democracy works especially well in this country and in the structure of this Chamber because there is a reasonable degree of consensus about and acceptance of the decisions that we take. However, there are many flaws in the way this Chamber operates. I do not want to go into them in this speech, which will deal mainly with the upper House, but the way we carry out our functions is in need of massive reform. That that is so does not alter the need for us to consider what goes on in the House of Lords.

We have been offered a package that goes only part of the way. I accept what is said about the hereditary peers being anachronistic, but they are an independent element. We are getting rid of that independent element and we will end up—it appears at the moment—with only nominated Members.

The functions of the upper House need to be strengthened—not enormously, but slightly. What I found most interesting in the contributions of Labour Members was not that they did not want the other place to have enhanced powers. Their fear was that the result of the reforms would be that the upper House might suddenly start to exercise the powers that it already has in a way that it would be wholly entitled to do. It could use its powers to scrutinise and, if necessary, delay legislation. That would be a good thing. I can think of few instances in which delaying legislation would result in some catastrophe, given the legislation that has passed through this Parliament since the second world war.

On constitutional issues, if there is disagreement between the upper House and this place, it is desirable that the upper House should have the power to block legislation and, if it blocks it twice, for the matter to be referred to a referendum to resolve it. That would be a powerful enhancement of democracy. If we take that approach—it is the only one we can properly take in a democratic society—it is axiomatic that the House of Lords will have to be principally an elected Chamber. It must be an elected Chamber. No other solution that has been put forward could command the legitimacy that the Chamber must have if it is properly to fulfil its functions.

Mr. Swayne: I ask my hon. Friend to extend that principle. Will he accept that apostolic succession is a form of election in a purer and more ancient sense, and it is highly desirable that it should be preserved in the new system that he is developing?

Mr. Grieve: I am not sure that I feel wholly qualified to comment on the apostolic succession. On the basic issue of the form that the upper House must take, I am convinced that election is the only solution and the only one that the electorate will accept. There are many ways in which that can be achieved, and I am certainly willing to consider a form of proportional representation.

For the reasons eloquently stated by my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Sleaford and North Hykeham (Mr. Hogg), there is no great philosophical debate about whether the system should be first past the post or proportional representation—it is a matter of practicality. I believe it is essential that we preserve the first-past-the-post system in this place. However, for a revising Chamber, in which perhaps no members of the Executive will sit, I have no objection to the idea of selection through some form of proportional representation.

We could have a rotating Chamber. One third of Members could have fixed terms of considerable length—nine or 10 years has been suggested—and others could have single terms. In those circumstances, I believe that we can create a vibrant second Chamber that has the capacity to revise legislation, to hold the Government to account, to generate its own legislation when the Government do not have time to do so, and to call a halt in certain circumstances unless a referendum were held. That would be a powerful enhancement of democracy.

I disagree entirely with the comments of the hon. Member for Harlow (Mr. Rammell) that the manifesto somehow confers great legitimacy on political parties,

which entitles them to ride roughshod over minority views during their period in office—especially when one considers that opinions often change. I was struck by the hon. Gentleman's failure to mention that what appears in a manifesto often does not reach the statute book. Is that omission so shameful that we should insist that every policy in the manifesto becomes legislation and that Governments cannot change their mind? Why on earth should we always allow Governments to have it their own way?

I do not have time to develop all my arguments, but I wish to touch on a matter that I raised by way of several interventions. I have always accepted that a purely elected system has one considerable drawback: the loss of the independent element in the form of those who have a great deal to contribute but will not necessarily be willing to stand for election.

It has been said that a great strength of the upper House is its ability to involve in political discussions and policy formulation appointed and hereditary peers who have no party political affiliations, who would not stand for election and who do not wish to wear the label of any political party. If we are to go down the road of electing members to the second Chamber, the greatest drawback will be the possibility a producing a replica of this place.

I have an open mind about this issue, but I do not wish to see appointed peers or Members of the House of Lords. The exercise of prime ministerial patronage is a deeply corrupting process. I was fascinated to hear the hon. Member for Cannock Chase (Dr. Wright) criticise the sale of hereditary peerages when the appointed system has its own inherent corruptions that many Labour Members appear happy to see continue.

I believe that there is mileage in considering the notion that if we are to have non-elected Members of the House of Lords, they should be co-opted by elected Members. Dozens of bodies and organisations up and down the land both co-opt and elect members. My right hon. Friend the Member for South Norfolk (Mr. MacGregor) argued that, in such circumstances, the party with the majority would co-opt its own placemen to supplement its numbers. That is not, however, likely to happen because there are two ways in which it can be prevented. First, if there is a system of proportional representation, it is unlikely that any party will have a majority to bring in its placemen because there will have to be a measure of agreement with others about who should enter the Chamber. Secondly, there is absolutely no reason why, in framing legislation, the House should not introduce a clause stating that the co-option should be done by two-thirds majority.

We belittle the upper House and its capacity as an elected Chamber to perform a role different from our own if we think that the views of its Members will be dominated by party political considerations. If we frame the legislation properly, we can allow those Members to carry out the co-option of possibly a quarter or even a third of their number to enable them to bring into the upper House for a similar period those who are willing to serve and have a contribution to make. If we are considering having unelected Members, that is the only way in which a reasonable level of legitimacy can be conferred. I should be prepared to consider and back that proposal because it has merit, and would have merit with the electorate.

I turn now to the point that was touched on by my hon. Friend the Member for New Forest, West (Mr. Swayne), who asked me about apostolic succession. There are two groups within the upper House who currently come from what can only be described as a slightly corporatist background: the first is the bishops and the other is the Law Lords.

I have great regard for the presence of the Law Lords in the upper House because it significantly enhances the quality of debate there and the whole approach and ethos by marrying, at the top end, the legislature and the judiciary. I do not believe in the separation of powers. One of this country's unique features is the extraordinary way in which we have maintained such links and the fact that they have been of benefit. Given the small number of seats involved, I would be willing to make an exception for the Law Lords and allow them to remain in the upper House by virtue of their office.

I regret to have to tell my hon. Friend the Member for New Forest, West that I have rather more serious doubts in respect of the bishops. There should be representation of religious organisations and organised religion, but that should be achieved by the co-option process that I have suggested rather than by enshrining in legislation a place for those of a particular denomination.

I could go on at great length on a large number of topics, but I shall refrain from doing so. I shall conclude by addressing the corporatist aspects of the debate. Frankly, I was shocked to hear some hon. Members suggest that Members of the upper House should be drawn from interest groups. That was a popular notion and may even have been popular with Churchill at the turn of the century. At that time, I regret to tell the House, some fascist notions had a certain degree of popularity and continued until, thankfully, they disappeared in the 1930s. Until then, the Webbs and many socialists were interested in those ideas. They are very cosy; they relate to the setting up of corporate groups that have interests that are exclusive to themselves and at variance with others outside.

Nobody has yet explained to me what happens to what I suppose might have been described as the lumpen proletariat, who are not supposed to form part of any interest group at all. Frankly, I am horrified that a democratic body should even be contemplating having an interest in those structures. I say to the hon. Member for Leominster (Mr. Temple-Morris) that although such structures may well work in Ireland because it is a small country, they are treated as archaic and they cause embarrassment to those who know the origins of the idea. It originated in an interest in fascism in the Republic of Ireland.

I see that 9.30 pm is approaching, so I shall obey the time constraint.

Mr. Hogg: The coach is at the door.

Mr. Grieve: Indeed; I shall respect that.

I urge the House to bear in mind the fact that only a primarily elected second Chamber will command the legitimacy required to provide the necessary scrutiny of legislation.

9.30 pm

Sir Patrick Cormack (South Staffordshire): I should make two brief apologies. First, I apologise to the hon. Member for Harrow, East (Mr. McNulty). I had hoped that he might have just a minute or two in which to speak. Secondly, I apologise to the House in general because, as the Minister and I agreed to cut our winding-up speeches from 20 minutes to 15, I fear that it will not be possible to give way if one is to try to deal with all 15 Back-Bench speeches. I greatly regret that because, as most hon. Members present know, I rather enjoy interventions.

I suppose that one should begin by saying that we would not have started from here. We do not believe that the Government have handled this issue well. The royal commission should have been established two years ago. In fact, the debate should have taken place at roughly the same time as those on the White Papers on devolution in the summer of 1997. If that had been so, we would perhaps have been able to make a more logical progression towards reform of the second Chamber.

But we must be where we are. We have had a good debate in what one must acknowledge is a thin House. Nevertheless, 15 Back-Bench speeches have been made—all of them thoughtful and stimulating, and some of them quite amusing. It is wonderful to hear ex-Ministers speak. We listened to the hon. Member for Stoke-on-Trent, Central (Mr. Fisher), my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Sleaford and North Hykeham (Mr. Hogg) and my right hon. and buccaneering Friend the Member for Bromley and Chislehurst (Mr. Forth). With the constraints of office removed from them all, they were able to talk about holding to account, when no Ministers were more tyrannical than they were. There is more joy in the House of Commons over one ex-Minister who repenteth than over 90 and nine others.

I believe that the Leader of the Opposition has the right to take some credit for establishing the Mackay commission. It is right that its extremely thoughtful document should have been submitted to the royal commission as part of our submission. It is right—indeed, it would be grossly discourteous if we did otherwise—to give ample time for discussion in our party of the two alternatives, as well as the others, before coming to a definitive conclusion. As we called for the establishment of the royal commission, and much as we regret the tardy implementation of that policy, it would be grossly discourteous if we did not await Lord Wakeham's final report before coming to a definitive conclusion. All my remarks in this debate must be against that background.

Of course, I am rather relieved to be able to say that. The hon. Member for Cannock Chase (Dr. Wright) said that we needed enormous political will and consensus if we were to move to agreed reform. We have heard the expression of quite a number of political wills, some more enormous than others, but we have certainly not seen any consensus on either side of the House. Several hon. Members have said that they think that stage 1 will last indefinitely. Although we are not here to debate stage 1, I say in parenthesis that it is incumbent on us all to do everything that we can at least to ensure that it works for as long as it lasts, because it will be the second Chamber for the foreseeable future.

Some diverse views have been expressed. The hon. Member for Braintree (Mr. Hurst) was the only unicameralist to take part in this debate, although we all know that a number of colleagues on both sides of the House share his view. My hon. Friend the Member for Faversham and Mid-Kent (Mr. Rowe) made an extraordinarily diverting speech. Towards the end of a most entertaining peroration, he seemed half to advocate a virtual Parliament. I do not quite know what he means by that, although we shall doubtless discover if he develops that idea in speeches and writings.

Various themes have run throughout the debate. The hon. Member for Stoke-on-Trent, Central said—and he said it very slowly and deliberately, and was right to do so—that we must remember that we are talking about one Parliament which has two Houses. It is impossible properly to discuss in isolation the powers, functions and composition of one House without having regard to the other House, or the effect that one has upon the other. That was the underlying theme of much of today's debate.

A number of hon. Members talked about the inadequacy of our scrutiny procedures. My hon. Friend the Member for Chichester (Mr. Tyrie) went so far as to call them "shoddy", but I think that we would all accept that they could definitely be improved.

My right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Sleaford and North Hykeham—picking up on a most admirable speech by the right hon. Member for Ashton-under-Lyne (Mr. Sheldon)—talked about the problems of holding the Executive to account. I tell the right hon. Gentleman that, if he could recast his speech into an article on how to be a Back Bencher and distribute it on both sides of the House, hon. Members would benefit greatly from it. He has great experience, and was able to demonstrate, going back as far as 30 years, how the independence of Back Benchers is crucial if one is to have an effective Executive.

A supine legislature provides for a bad Executive, and Government Back Benchers should always remember that. It is only by articulating principles and being prepared—as the hon. Member for Thurrock (Mr. Mackinlay) is so regularly prepared—to speak out that the Executive are kept on their toes. Would that more hon. Members emulated his example.

We had a particularly interesting and thoughtful speech from the former Leader of the House, my right hon. Friend the Member for South Norfolk (Mr. MacGregor). He is not an advocate of direct elections, but favours a mixed-composition House. He also expressed the very real need for improving our powers of scrutiny, particularly of secondary legislation. He talked about Henry VIII clauses, but I should tell him that I have rather rechristened them as Louis XIV clauses, as the current Government so often seem to think that "L'état c'est moi." However, their predecessor was not entirely without blemish in that regard.

My right hon. Friend the Member for South Norfolk also talked about the need to improve scrutiny of European legislation, and perhaps to re-examine the revising powers of the House of Lords and the length of time that it should have to delay legislation.

My right hon. Friend was not alone in advocating a non-elected or mixed-composition House. The hon. Member for Harlow (Mr. Rammell) made an extremely long speech—28 minutes—on that particular subject. My former hon. Friend the Member for Leominster (Mr. Temple-Morris)—who is still a friend, but who, in

parliamentary terms, can no longer deserve the epithet of hon. Friend—also made an interesting speech on that type of House.

One has to accept, however, that the majority of speeches—particularly those made by Opposition Members—argued for either a wholly or largely directly elected House. That message was quite clear in the speeches of my right hon. Friend the Member for Bromley and Chislehurst, my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Sleaford and North Hykeham, my hon. Friend the Member for Chichester—who has written, lectured and broadcast so extensively on the subject—and my hon. Friend the Member for Beaconsfield (Mr. Grieve), who made the final Back-Bench speech in the debate. One of the themes that they all took up—as did some of those who argued for a mixed-composition House—was that, in a mixed second Chamber, it would perhaps be advisable not to have Ministers. That point was echoed on both sides of the House.

It is crucial that we should reflect carefully on what the royal commission says; study, analyse and debate its findings; and do so mindful of what has been said in the House in this debate. However, it is crucial to the future of our democracy that we should not rush to judgment, either before or immediately after the royal commission reports. We should consider, as part of our discussion process, all those views, and we have to recognise the strengths and weaknesses in every argument.

We should be honest with each other. I am of a conservative persuasion, but those of us who tend to favour the more cautious, evolutionary approach must beware of the pitfalls of patronage, which have been talked about eloquently by many of my hon. Friends and Labour Members. If there are to be appointed peers, the system of appointment must be beyond the control of party leaders, although it can never be beyond their legitimate influence.

We must recognise that there are many who believe that those arguments are deeply flawed. However, those who propose a radical solution must be aware that a wholly elected Chamber, notwithstanding any transitional stages, would sweep away those who currently serve in the other place.

Mr. Forth: That is the whole idea.

Sir Patrick Cormack: It may be, but it would not be inappropriate to say a word from the Dispatch Box in recognition of the sterling service that the life peers, like the hereditary peers, have performed over the years. It would be churlish not to recognise that there is a great reservoir of talent there: political, academic, industrial, commercial, military—you name it, it is there. To sweep it away without complete regard for what we are doing would be a serious step.

The right hon. Member for Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross (Mr. Maclennan)—or Easter Island, as was once said—acknowledged that some appointments might be necessary to ensure that there were some independent members. Without some such mechanism, a directly elected House would mean the end of the Cross Benchers. Such a House could also deliver greater power to the party machines than any appointment system, particularly if the elections were held with the crass system that we are to have tomorrow. It would dramatically transform relations between the Houses, leading almost inevitably to the creation of a supreme court and a written constitution. It would also create a situation in which only the Head of State was not elected.

None of those is an insuperable obstacle. All matters are open for discussion. My party has not closed its mind to the option, but we must recognise that there are serious issues to debate. We also have to consider who would seek election to such a body. If its powers remained as the White Paper envisages, there would be little incentive for those of high talent and real ability to seek election. The need to seek election and satisfy constituents would seriously reduce the time that members had for scrutiny. If we are to give United States-style senatorial powers, as my right hon. Friend the Member for Bromley and Chislehurst forthrightly advocates, we have to ask what we would be doing in this Chamber and what our relations would be with the other House. All those profound questions have to be addressed.

It is important not to be seduced by arguments of superficial legitimacy. What matters is the system as a whole. No one seriously suggests that, because we are a constitutional monarchy with a non-elected upper House, we are not a proper parliamentary democracy. We are, and for the best part of the past 200 years we have been held up throughout the world as an example of a true parliamentary democracy.

The hon. Member for Harlow used the old cliché about throwing out the baby with the bath water. We have to be careful that we do not demolish the bathroom as well. Out of our deliberations must come a strengthened parliamentary system. We must create two Houses in which the Executive are held properly to account and all legislation—primary, secondary, European, the lot—is thoroughly and properly scrutinised. We must be able to deliver something that is better than the current system. That is our only legitimate aim and that is my definition of legitimacy. Over the next few months, as we wait for Lord Wakeham's commission to report, I ask the House to have as broad a discussion as possible in all our parties. We must face up to the real issues involved, some of which I have tried briefly to refer to this evening.

9.45 pm

The Parliamentary Secretary, Privy Council Office (Mr. Paddy Tipping): This debate has been delayed, but it has been well worth waiting for. There have been 18 speakers and, as the hon. Member for Beaconsfield (Mr. Grieve) said earlier, it has been in the nature of a discussion. I have sat through almost all of it and I have learned a great deal. The discussion has helped to crystallise my thinking.

As well as discussion we have had confessions. I was struck by the confession of the right hon. and learned Member for Sleaford and North Hykeham (Mr. Hogg) who told us about his life as a Whip. I welcome a sinner who repents. I turn to my colleagues and ask them to look closely at his words and to repent before midnight.

We have also had tutorials. I got slightly alarmed when my right hon. Friend the Member for Ashton-under-Lyne (Mr. Sheldon) was giving a coaching lesson to my hon. Friend the Member for Pendle (Mr. Prentice). My hon. Friend is certainly not a clone and giving him tips on how to offer more effective opposition was dangerous.

Anybody who thought that there would be some sort of consensus arising from the debate would have been disappointed. I was struck by the comment of my hon.

[Mr. Paddy Tipping]

Friend the Member for Leominster (Mr. Temple-Morris) who said that he hoped the commission would listen to our collective views. I am not sure what our collective views are. Different people have expressed different views. We have heard from unicameralists, those who want an elected second Chamber, those who want an appointed second Chamber and those who want a mixed second Chamber. There has been talk about people being elected to represent communities of interest and that there should be functional representatives and representatives from different parts of the United Kingdom. There has been a good deal of talk, highlighted by the hon. Member for South Staffordshire (Sir P. Cormack), that the second Chamber should not include Ministers but should have a purely scrutinising and revising role.

What has struck me most about the debate is how self-critical it has been. Hon. Members from both sides of the House have expressed a real desire to check the role of the Executive and to scrutinise legislation more closely. No one has been partisan about that as the views have been expressed on both sides of the Chamber. There has been an understanding that the situation has prevailed for many years and I sensed tonight a real desire for change.

In part answer to the criticism, my right hon. Friend the Member for Ashton-under-Lyne and the right hon. Member for Bromley and Chislehurst (Mr. Forth) told us to look to ourselves and to use our existing devices and powers to achieve our aim, but other steps can be taken, too. The right hon. Member for South Norfolk (Mr. MacGregor) mentioned pre-legislative scrutiny. I am delighted that that is beginning to happen and that draft Bills are being considered by Select Committees and Special Standing Committees involving Members from both Chambers.

I was struck by the comment of the hon. Member for Faversham and Mid-Kent (Mr. Rowe) who, as well as talking about information technology and Members pushing buttons, made a telling point about what his constituents want from him. They want to ensure that the services delivered by the Government and their agencies—as he put it—make things better. After all, government is about making things better. The hon. Gentleman also drew attention to the need for Parliament to discuss the issues of the day—not simply to resolve them, but to highlight them and give them air. There is a wider point here. We need to develop the role of the House to consider and check what has been done and how far what has been promised has been achieved. At the moment, we are not particularly good at that.

A number of hon. Members drew attention to the democratic deficit and the desire for closer scrutiny which can be achieved only by increasing powers to the second Chamber. Let me reinforce a point that has been made several times within the debate: we need to look at the powers available to the House of Lords and the powers that are actually used. I believe that that reform will give us an opportunity to codify that and put practices and traditions on a better footing. A reformed upper House will have new confidence. The sign of a good relationship is the ability to fall out but still continue to talk. Reform will give us the opportunity to do just that.

Some have argued for new and increased powers for the second Chamber. However, a more sophisticated and persuasive argument would press the case for different and complementary powers for the second Chamber. A number of suggestions have been made as to what they should be and I anticipate that the royal commission will look at them closely.

It is significant that we are having this debate at all and that we are having it now. Its tone shows that change will happen. The House of Lords Reform Bill is making progress in the upper House. I followed its Committee stage with interest—all seven and a half days of it and all 180 amendments. Its Report stage starts next week. Some of the issues that the House of Lords will be considering have been raised tonight. They include the powers of the House of Lords and its relationship with the Commons, the status of any appointments committee, the size of a reformed House of Lords and the arrangements to govern the relative strengths of the parties within it.

Let me stir it up, as my hon. Friend the Member for Cannock Chase (Dr. Wright) said earlier. His neighbour, the hon. Member for South Staffordshire (Sir P. Cormack) said, "We would not have started from here". Some of us would reply, "You would not have started at all". We need only look back at the Conservative party campaign guide, the Conservative manifesto and in particular the views expressed by the chairman of the party in his submission to the royal commission last month. He said:

"We did not seek to change the House of Lords",

but the debate has moved forward.

I read the Mackay report and I found it thoughtful and temperate in its approach. It said that many of the powers currently exercised by the House of Lords should be maintained, but that it should not be given any greater powers. I noted that it stressed the primacy of the House of Commons.

We have not had an opportunity to discuss in detail the submission by the Conservative party to the royal commission. The hon. Member for Woodspring (Dr. Fox) invited us to get a copy. I tried and it was extremely difficult. I asked for a copy from Conservative Central Office. We wrote and begged for one and it did not come, but today we managed to get a copy of "A Stronger Parliament". Let me refer to some of its contents. The Conservatives wanted at least a directly elected element. They were not attracted to indirect representation from the Scottish Parliament or the Welsh Assembly. They wanted increasing powers over secondary legislation, no age limit, no quotas, an opening size of around 659 members and a kind of monthly question time. Some of the things in that submission appear to be in contrast to what the noble Lord Mackay has said.

I wish to stress something that my right hon. Friend the Leader of the House said. We are committed to ensuring that no party has an overall majority in the upper Chamber. I do not accept the disparaging remarks of Opposition Members on either that commitment or on the appointments commission. For the first time ever, we have a Prime Minister who is giving up powers. *[Interruption.]* Conservative Members may scoff, but I have looked carefully at the appointments made by previous Conservative Prime Ministers, which deserve scrutiny. The royal commission will examine closely the need for parity of parties and the work of the appointments commission.

Along with the right hon. Member for South Norfolk (Mr. MacGregor) and the hon. Member for Chichester (Mr. Tyrie), I have been impressed with the start that the

royal commission has made. During the debates, there has been criticism of the timetable. The royal commission has been given a tight timetable—I acknowledge that. Nevertheless, we expect its report around the end of the year. I have been impressed by the commission's desire to gain views from outside the magic political circle. It published a consultation paper which set out the questions that the commission thought needed to be addressed as part of its evidence-gathering. It is available on a web site.

In addition, the commission has been out on the road. I understand that these events have been positively received, despite what some newspaper reports have said about poor attendance. Those who attended felt that it was worth while and that their views were listened to properly. The road shows received extensive coverage in the local media. I was particularly impressed by a double-page spread in the *Peterborough Evening Telegraph* on 25 May. Not only was the coverage extensive, it was thoughtful, informative and spread the debate to a much wider audience. All of that bodes well for the royal commission's report, which I look forward to reading at the end of the year.

The House of Lords Bill has proved the trigger for change, and I hope and expect that the Bill will complete all its stages shortly. The two-stage approach will prove to be manageable and successful. It is, after all, in our long tradition of gradual change. Some have argued for a big bang approach. However, a manageable approach, taken in stages, will prove to be correct. After a century of debate, we will be able to deliver the goods.

The debate tonight has looked further forward, and I hope that the royal commission will take note of the views expressed. It has a tough timetable to meet, but let me point out to doubters on both sides of the House that the tough timetable is an indication of the Government's good faith and of our intention to seek a proper and fundamental reform of the House of Lords. It is also clear evidence of our desire that, after more than a century of debate, this time that will be achieved.

I conclude with some words from the White Paper, as set out in the executive summary. The commission is

"being asked to report by the end of 1999, to enable the Government to make every effort to ensure that the second stage of reform has been approved by Parliament by the time of the general election."

That remains our firm intention.

It being Ten o'clock, the motion for the Adjournment of the House lapsed, without Question put.

Kosovo

10 pm

The Secretary of State for Defence (Mr. George Robertson): I come to the House with some important and welcome news about the situation in Kosovo. At the end of many long and hard hours of discussion and negotiation, General Sir Michael Jackson has announced that he has signed the military technical agreement on behalf of NATO, setting out the detailed conditions for peace in the light of the draft United Nations Security Council resolution.

The agreement sets out in detail how all the Serb forces should conduct a phased, verifiable and orderly withdrawal from Kosovo. It provides, as General Jackson has made clear, an agreed basis for the deployment of an international security force, known as KFOR, to establish a secure environment in Kosovo.

The House will appreciate that this agreement is a major political and military vindication of NATO's policy, of its resolve and of its determination to end the horrific ethnic cleansing conducted by Milosevic and his troops and regime. It will pave the way for the eventual return of the refugees.

We expect that the United Nations Security Council resolution will be passed shortly and that the necessary measures will all be in place for the rapid deployment of KFOR, but I must warn the House that we have been misled by Milosevic before. We have learned not to trust his words and we will need to see his troops on the way out of Kosovo. We will want to see verifiable compliance with the terms of the agreement before allowing NATO to suspend the bombing campaign.

That is up to Milosevic. For our part, we look forward to being able to move to the next and very demanding stage and to the enormous challenges that lie ahead. As my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister made clear, there is now a huge job to be done as the Serb forces go out, the international force goes in and we get the refugees home. We are ready for that task and British forces will be among the first to cross the border into Kosovo. All the House will, I am sure, be proud of that effort and join me in wishing them and their NATO allies every success in the difficult weeks and months ahead.

Mr. John Maples (Stratford-on-Avon): The whole House will be delighted with that news, and we are very grateful to the Secretary of State for coming here tonight to make his statement. This is obviously a major step on the road from war to peace, although, as he said, there are an awful lot of problems still to be overcome.

The talks were obviously extremely difficult and our thanks are due to General Jackson and his staff. Were any concessions made in the course of the talks? Press reports say that the Serbs are being given longer to withdraw than the seven days originally planned. Will that delay the deployment of KFOR, and is there a possibility that both KFOR and the Yugoslav army will be in Kosovo at the same time? Does that present any difficulties? It is also reported that the buffer zone has been reduced from 25 to 5 km. Is that significant to the security of KFOR?

What timing does the Secretary of State expect on the UN Security Council resolution? He said that he hoped that it would be passed soon, but, as I understand it—

[Mr. John Maples]

perhaps he can confirm this—KFOR cannot be deployed into Kosovo until it has been passed and the sequence would be: Serb withdrawal; cessation of bombing; UN Security Council resolution; and then the deployment of KFOR. We would all like to know that KFOR was in a position to deploy as soon as possible. Does he anticipate any difficulties about China's vote in the UN Security Council?

We all understand that the crucial test of success in the operation is the refugees being able to return to their homes, and the crucial ingredient in that is the composition of KFOR. Is there any significance in the fact that a footnote to the terms agreed on 3 June by Ahtisaari and the Serb Government spoke of KFOR having

"NATO at its core"

and a

"unified chain of command under the political direction of the North Atlantic Council"

but that the UN Security Council draft resolution does not go as far as that and mentions NATO only in an annexe referring to "substantial NATO participation"?

I know that such negotiations are difficult and the wording does not always say exactly what will happen, but we would like to feel sure that the force will be able to do its job, because, if it cannot, the refugees will not go home and we will not have succeeded in what the Government and all of us have set out to achieve.

Will the Secretary of State say a word about whether Russian troops will participate in KFOR? It has been said that they will not be under NATO command, but it is important to ensure that Russia does not get a zone of occupation in Kosovo and Russian troops are spread around, as they are in Bosnia.

The difficulties for KFOR, its British component and General Jackson are only just beginning. They have all been sitting waiting for this moment for several months—all of them for several weeks, and General Jackson for several months. I am sure that the whole House wishes them every good fortune in the operations that they are about to undertake.

Mr. Robertson: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his opening comments about the efforts that have led to this evening's news, and especially for his praise for General Mike Jackson. I was with General Jackson yesterday in Macedonia, and I know how much he appreciates the support given by so many people in this country, and on both sides of the House. The hon. Gentleman and I, with other Opposition Members, have visited some of our troops in action, and that in itself was a solid illustration of the way in which the British public have stayed with the campaign through all its difficult days, helping us to ensure that we get the refugees back home, and that the strategic threat that Milosevic represents not only to Kosovo but to the wider Balkans, has, as I hope, been seen off.

The hon. Gentleman asked several detailed questions, but he will appreciate that there are many of them that I cannot answer. I have come to report to the House, as I thought proper, at the earliest opportunity, and we have not had the opportunity to see all the technical details.

However, the hon. Gentleman can take it from me, and from his own instincts, that General Mike Jackson would not have agreed to any conditions in the military technical agreement that he thought would obstruct his work in getting KFOR in safely and securely to go about its job. Some of the technical questions about timing will be fixed in the agreement, which will have realistically laid down, in a verifiable way, times when all the Serb forces will leave Kosovo.

One of the reasons for the delay in the discussions in the now famous tent was the need to ensure that there would be no security vacuum in Kosovo, and the Serb withdrawal would be synchronised with KFOR's entry. I am sure that we will be satisfied with those provisions.

The hon. Gentleman asked about the timing of the United Nations Security Council resolutions and the like. I am told that the North Atlantic Council, to which the military technical agreement will go, is in session as we speak, and it is possible that the UN Security Council will also meet soon, perhaps even before dawn, so that, simultaneously, each of the features of the agreement—the Ahtisaari-Chernomyrdin agreement, the draft Security Council resolution and the technical military agreement—can all work together to ensure that movement can be as quick as possible.

The hon. Gentleman also asked me about a unified chain of command. I can assure him that General Jackson, who signed the military technical agreement tonight as commander of KFOR on behalf of NATO, is under no illusions, and neither are the Serbs, about his role and the way in which he will go about his business.

I cannot answer questions about the role of the Russians, but we all hope that they and the other nations will find a peacekeeping role inside Kosovo. That will be done in the best and most effective way possible. I must correct the hon. Gentleman, in that the Russians who are working with us in Bosnia are not scattered throughout the country; they operate within the structures and they have their own particular structures, which have worked well in the past. They are in one zone in one of the multinational divisions in Bosnia. However, that does not determine the way in which things will happen in future.

At the end of his question, the hon. Gentleman rightly commended our troops for what they have done. I also commend the Royal Air Force, the Royal Navy and the civilian back-up in the Ministry of Defence—people who have done a great deal here. I also commend the other elements inside the Government machine—the Foreign and Commonwealth Office and my right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary, who has played such a distinguished role in the past few days in securing the draft Security Council resolution, and all those in the Foreign Office, the Cabinet Office and No. 10 who have contributed to ensuring that we reached this position.

I repeat what I said before: despite all the difficulties, traumas and pain involved, the task of the past 75 days may have been the easier part of the job. A difficult job is ahead of us now which will require the same unity of purpose in the alliance and the same grim determination that has seen us through all these days. We must make sure that we deliver on the promise that we all gave—to get the Kosovo refugees back to their homeland again.

Mr. Menzies Campbell (North-East Fife): The announcement by the Secretary of State is a credit to all

those responsible for these matters over the past 75 days, and in particular to General Sir Mike Jackson. Anyone who has ever met him will know that those facing him across the negotiating table faced a very formidable adversary indeed.

Does the Secretary of State understand that, even for those who supported the Government, tonight is an occasion not for triumphalism so much as for relief? As he rightly pointed out, many of the past 78 days have been difficult. Would we not be right to be cautious about the tasks that lie ahead, not least because we have little idea of what NATO forces may find when they penetrate into Kosovo? Apart from the risks posed by booby traps and the indiscriminate use of mines, is it not also possible that untold horrors of brutality remain to be uncovered?

In that regard, will the Secretary of State assure the House that British forces, and the NATO forces in general, will be assiduous in collecting evidence so that those who ought to face the war crimes tribunal in The Hague may be indicted in due course?

Finally, the Secretary of State will be aware that some individual members of the minority community of people of Serbian extraction have displayed conspicuous bravery in attempting to aid their neighbours against those seeking to ethnically cleanse the country in which they lived. Does that not argue very strongly for a clear statement by NATO and the United Nations that any forces deployed in Kosovo will act in an even-handed manner, so that the policy and principles of non-discrimination can be part of the rebuilding of Kosovo?

Mr. Robertson: I thank the right hon. and learned Gentleman for what he has said just now and for his consistent support throughout all the weeks of this campaign. He is right to pay credit to General Jackson. Anyone who has met him—that now includes the Serb generals—is in no doubt about his commitment, determination, skill, clarity and power. The other night, I mentioned to a large number of troops from Britain and other nations that I was very glad to be his boss and not his subordinate. No man is better suited to dealing with the situation that now exists.

I feel no sense of euphoria this evening, and neither do any of the troops or any of the staff in my Department. Yes, there is a cautious relief at what we have got this evening, but there is also, as the right hon. and learned Gentleman noted, an apprehension about what our troops may find in Kosovo. That apprehension arises in part from the physical dangers that the troops may encounter, but our troops are professionally trained to deal with them. However, it stems also from the horrors of the ethnic cleansing that began some time last year.

In regard to those who have committed crimes against humanity, I can tell the right hon. and learned Gentleman that we will be resolute in tracking them down. Where we find relevant evidence as the troops go in, we will make sure that the investigators from the international criminal tribunal get access to it before it can be destroyed. Indeed, section 14 of the draft security council resolution demands

"full co-operation of all concerned, including the international security presence, with the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia."

The UN has imposed that obligation on all its members.

The right hon. and learned Gentleman made a v[illegible]id point about those Serbs who had the courage, decency and bravery to speak out during the campaign against the way in which the Milosevic regime was conducting itself. I hope that the people of Yugoslavia will look to those people for a clear future once Milosevic has gone. Ten per cent. of the population of Kosovo is of Serb extraction. When General Jackson spoke outside that tent in Kumanovo about the even-handedness with which he will do his job, he spoke directly to those people, who have a right to their homeland. If they have acted decently during the campaign, they have every right to stay there and to be treated properly as part of the community. General Jackson will take on that obligation with great pleasure.

Mr. Peter L. Pike (Burnley): While we welcome the statement, those of us who supported the Government's actions consistently during the past 10 weeks must emphasise that we fully regret every bomb that was dropped and every death that has occurred, as does the Prime Minister. Milosevic, the butcher of his own people in Bosnia and Kosovo, left us no alternative but to take action to end unacceptable ethnic cleansing. Should we ensure that the United Nations and the European Union concentrate on overcoming the major problems that we will find when we enter Kosovo and Yugoslavia? There are problems throughout the region, including in Albania, Romania and Bulgaria, which have been economically weakened by the struggles of the past few weeks.

Mr. Robertson: My hon. Friend speaks wisely in pointing out that we regret that we had to resort to force. The intransigence of Milosevic, the way in which he conducts his business and the violence with which he has conducted the campaign left us no alternative but to act both for humanitarian reasons, to save the people who were at threat, and for strategic reasons. Milosevic would not have stopped at Kosovo. Vojvodina would have been next and Montenegro after that. Who knows where would have been next—Romania, Bulgaria, Macedonia or Albania? That is why British and NATO troops have been engaged. My hon. Friend was right to draw attention to the commitments that the international community will have to take on. In particular, Europe must rebuild that part of the Balkans and seek greater security for everyone who lives in that troubled part of the world.

Sir John Stanley (Tonbridge and Malling): Will the number of Serbian troops and paramilitary police who will eventually be allowed back into Kosovo still be measured only in the hundreds?

Mr. Robertson: Yes.

Mr. Tam Dalyell (Linlithgow): Who will be responsible for civil administration in Kosovo?

The Prime Minister said yesterday that the administration would be guaranteed by the international community, but who will take the responsibility in the coming days?

Given that one of the most difficult problems facing any forces is to distinguish between guerrillas and civilians, how will we disarm the Kosovo Liberation Army both inside and outside Kosovo?

On ethnic cleansing, will measures be taken to protect the 100,000 members of the Serb community, most of whom are innocent and will face the danger of ethnic cleansing? Will any protection be given to the holy places, particularly the monastery of Decani?

[Mr. Tam Dalyell]

Finally, as a matter of urgency, will my right hon. Friend set up a radiological survey following the use of depleted uranium munitions by NATO and a further survey of the dioxin poisons in the Danube and elsewhere? Such surveys are very urgent.

Mr. Robertson: But not nearly as urgent as getting back all the people evicted from their homeland. That is our priority. Although several of those matters will have to be treated, they will be handled with their due priority. The answer to my hon. Friend's first question about the civil administration is detailed in paragraph 10 of the draft United Nations Security Council resolution. In the first few days, it is clear that the commander of KFOR will be responsible for law and order until the Secretary-General has appointed an international civil presence in accordance with paragraph 10.

My hon. Friend asked about the disarmament of the KLA. Paragraph 9(b) of the draft resolution calls for the

"demilitarisation of the Kosovo Liberation Army (KLA) and other armed Kosovo Albanian groups as required in paragraph 15".

The leaders of the KLA have been on television almost as often as my hon. Friend to make it clear that they, too, will comply with the provisions of the UN Security Council resolution.

My hon. Friend asked about the Serb community inside Kosovo, which I mentioned specifically. It will be another obligation on KFOR in the initial stages, and ultimately the international civil authority, to ensure that all the citizens of Kosovo, whatever their ethnic background, are protected from violence. The holy places will be protected under another provision of the international treaty by the troops who be allowed to return in small numbers for that specific task.

On the environmental impact, certain aspects of Yugoslav life will be affected by the bombing. It was all completely unnecessary. The bombing need not have taken place. Force need not have been used if Milosevic had recognised that the international community would not stand back and watch him butcher people because they happened to be of Albanian extraction.

Sir Peter Emery (East Devon): Will the Secretary of State accept that not only Front Benchers but Back Benchers wish to praise the work of our troops and of all the NATO troops, especially the Americans, who are not often mentioned but who played such a major role? To put party politics to one side, it is fair to say that one man much enhanced his reputation by being so firm and definite: the Secretary of State for Defence.

Has the Secretary of State heard the statements made in the past 90 minutes by the Serb generals? They are saying that they signed the peace treaty to end the war and implement Milosevic's plans for peace. I have never heard such false nonsense, but that is what is going to be put over.

Mr. Stephen Pound (Ealing, North): Alastair Campbell.

Sir Peter Emery: The point is not missed.

Will the Secretary of State ensure that the Serb people realise that this agreement could have been accepted by Milosevic months ago, even last October, without the loss of life and terrible damage to property caused by the bombing?

Mr. Robertson: With due modesty, I thank the right hon. Gentleman for his courteous comments. I take them as praise for the Department that I have the privilege to lead and for the troops out there on the front line. He is right to commend the United States of America, without which we could not have assembled the air armada, with its precision weaponry, which has brought us to this point and ended the conflict.

My memory is gradually coming back. We cannot all have omnibus memories and I realise that, in my earlier praise, I missed out the Department for International Development. Given the sheer scale of the challenge faced by all of us when the refugees came across the border, my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for International Development and the officials in her Department acted heroically to ensure that people were treated well.

The right hon. Gentleman mentioned Serb propaganda. I fear that many people who should have known better listened to the lies told by Milosevic and were taken in by those lies for all too long. I am glad that, eventually, the damage done to the military machine persuaded some people that perhaps they should have considered the truth for a moment. When the truth comes out, many decent people in Serbia will curl up in shame.

Ms Bridget Prentice (Lewisham, East): That cautious relief referred to by my right hon. Friend at the beginning of his statement is felt not only by Members of the House and by the people of Britain, but by the Kosovan refugees, some of whom have been welcomed to many of our constituencies. The unity of purpose of which he spoke, and which has also been expressed by the shadow Secretary of State for Defence during the past few weeks, must be expressed by all Members of the House. If it is not so done, those in Belgrade will take great succour.

Mr. Robertson: The House speaks with one voice. Milosevic cannot misunderstand the message: the relief that a mission, started with great reluctance, will end, we hope, with the refugees going back to their homes. My hon. Friend is right to point out that many people in this country took to their hearts and to their local communities the refugees from Kosovo, who came so far away from their own homes. Their stories, their personalities and their plight touched the hearts of millions of people throughout the continent and throughout the world. That in itself kept the drive going to ensure that Milosevic did not get away with making them refugees for ever.

Dr. Julian Lewis (New Forest, East): The Secretary of State will recall that I consistently supported the use of military action from the earliest stages of this crisis. I congratulate the right hon. Gentleman and his fellow Ministers on their steadiness under political fire. Does he agree that those of us who were concerned about the over-reliance on air power alone may not have been proven wholly wrong, in that what was crucial to the resolution of the crisis—as well as the proper use of air power in context—was the success of our diplomacy in

bringing the Russians on side and the threat, which was becoming much clearer, that ground forces would be used if Milosevic did not comply?

Mr. Robertson: I thank the hon. Gentleman for what he rightly says was his consistent support for our efforts. That has been carefully noticed by the public; their consistent support has also been absolutely essential. This evening of all evenings, I do not want to debate the ins and outs of what led us to this point. It was a combination of a series of factors, but, more than any of them, it was the commitment, resolution and unity of an alliance of free nations standing together against an unconscionable evil in our continent. That, if anything, was what led to the success of tonight.

Dr. Lynne Jones (Birmingham, Selly Oak): I share my right hon. Friend's wish that the refugees will soon be able to go home. Will he assure the House that every possible assistance will be given to them and to other innocent victims of the war to rebuild their lives? Looking further into the future, has not the conflict in Kosovo highlighted the contradiction between the United Nations charter, with its emphasis on national sovereignty, and international law on human rights? Will the Government set themselves the task of securing international agreement on criteria that, if met, would make it appropriate to undertake international military intervention for humanitarian purposes?

Mr. Robertson: Providing assistance in rebuilding Kosovo and other parts of the Balkans will be a heavy burden on all of us in this and every other country of our continent, but we must do it, because we must not allow Milosevic to get away with the damage that he has done to the community there. Some of the British troops I met yesterday were Royal Engineers, and I was able personally to praise them for their work to create the refugee villages. If people can remember that far back, take the scene on Easter weekend of the ocean of human misery on the border between Macedonia and Kosovo; in 36 hours, those troops created towns in which people had habitation, shelter and food.

My hon. Friend makes an important and significant point about the limits of national sovereignty and the way in which the UN charter appeared until now to countenance the idea that anything went, as long as it happened within the national boundaries of any one country. We have shown that the international community has a bigger conscience and a bigger sense of responsibility than that implies. I dare say that, in the great debates that will take place after the refugees have gone back to their homes, that is one of the issues that will have to be addressed.

Mr. Nicholas Winterton (Macclesfield): I commend the Secretary of State on the role that he has played in the conflict over the past 75 days. I believe that all of our armed services are the most professional in the world, and they have shown themselves to be so in the way in which they have tackled serious difficulties.

However, does the Secretary of State believe that we should be concerned, given that one of the news tapes I read earlier this evening indicated that NATO had watered down several key conditions in order to get agreement with the Yugoslav generals more quickly than would otherwise have been the case? Does the right hon. Gentleman feel that watering down those key conditions might undermine the chances of there being a lasting peace and a stable Yugoslavia?

Mr. Robertson: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his commendation, but I am only one member of a Government who took on this commitment with the support of hon. Members on both sides of the House. My right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary, who is in Cologne tonight, and my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for International Development have, with my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister, played key roles in a team that set out to establish the rule of international law and order, and we had the support of hon. Members on both sides of the House for our action.

The hon. Gentleman is right to say that we have what we consider to be the best troops in the world. That is why the strategic defence review was specifically designed to ensure that, in future and if the country wanted us to, we would be able to do the right thing when there was a humanitarian challenge and a threat to the security of our continent.

None of the conditions that we sought has been watered down. The conditions laid down by NATO at the very beginning—the withdrawal of all Serb troops and paramilitaries; the return of the refugees; the insertion of an international security force; and a political process to take place to secure a future for the people of the region—have all been satisfied by and enshrined in the various agreements of the past few days. The hon. Gentleman should ask himself whether if the conditions had been watered down to the extent our troops might have been endangered, it is likely that General Jackson would have signed up to any agreement.

Mr. Malcolm Wicks (Croydon, North): The Secretary of State is right to sound a note of caution, for until the Serbian slaughter machine is out of Kosovo and the great majority of the people of Kosovo have returned to their shattered homes and villages, there is no cause for congratulation. Nevertheless, I offer my thanks to the Secretary of State and his colleagues.

Those of us who have called for the protection of the Albanian majority in Kosovo now call with equal passion for the protection of the Serbian minority. One of the major aims of the peacekeeping force has to be to protect the innocent and decent people of Serbia in Kosovo from any action against them.

Our resolution on war crimes would be put into good effect if within days or weeks Karadzic and Mladic in Bosnia were arrested and brought before the International War Crimes Tribunal. For too long, those mass murderers have been allowed to go free, often passing the peacekeeping forces daily.

At some stage, this Parliament must take stock of the lessons of Yugoslavia. Five or six years ago, the majority on both sides of the House was in favour of appeasement. It would be absurd if we did not remember that tonight. My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State and his colleagues, including my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister, were right in recent weeks to ignore those on both sides of the House who called for appeasement. If those right hon. and hon. Members, and they know who they are, had been heeded, the killing of young men would

[Mr. Malcolm Wicks]

have continued, as would the burning of homes, the rape of young women and girls and the terrible treatment of elders in Kosovo. Those right hon. and hon. Members will soon have to account for what they urged the Government to do. I am thrilled and excited that the Government did the right thing.

Mr. Robertson: Doing the right thing is what we are all about. Some will always disagree, but we live in a democracy. I just wish that people in Yugoslavia had been able to speak out in the way that Members of this House can, without any punishment. They may be criticised, but there has been much criticism in the past few weeks of those of us who took a stand that did not always look as good as it has in the past few days. The consistency and unity that have been the hallmarks of NATO have been an example to all.

My hon. Friend mentioned the protection of the Serb minority and General Jackson made it clear this evening that he will act even-handedly. It is imperative that that message goes out to the Serb minority. We are not in the business of ethnic cleansing, even after the trials and tribulations of the majority population. If we are to recreate a decent society, it must be with all those who call it their homeland being able to live there also.

On war crimes and those who have been indicted for them, I remind my hon. Friend that on Monday British troops acting with the stabilisation force in Bosnia apprehended in Prijedor a man who was indicted for being a shift commander at a concentration camp only a few years ago in Bosnia. He is now, like so many others that we have picked up, in The Hague facing international justice. Eventually, the day will come when all those mentioned by my hon. Friend and others will face the same justice.

Mr. Douglas Hogg (Sleaford and North Hykeham): The right hon. Gentleman will know that I am one of those who have been critical of the United Kingdom's involvement in the war. That notwithstanding, will he accept my personal congratulations to him on the way in which he has discharged the burdens of his office? Looking forward, what are his planning assumptions about the United Kingdom's contributions to KFOR? How many troops, how long will they be deployed and what planning assumptions have been made about cost? What are the likely consequences of a substantial deployment on our ability to mount another operation, for example in north Iraq, and what will be the impact of the cost on other defence objectives, for example the naval modernisation programme?

Mr. Robertson: I recognise that the right hon. and learned Gentleman has dissented honourably during the conflict and it is decent of him to say what he said. Others will reflect on the criticisms that they expressed and the forecasts and prophecies they made about what would happen. However, with the greatest respect to the right hon. and learned Gentleman, I do not think that our exchange this evening, based on breaking news at 9 o'clock in the evening, is the time to go into all those details. I encourage him to come back to the House tomorrow afternoon for the debate on defence in the world which will start after business questions, when I will deal with those and many other subjects.

Mr. Malcolm Savidge (Aberdeen, North): May I congratulate the Secretary of State and the Government on the critical role that they have played in achieving this result? Does my right hon. Friend believe that, although the situation may remain difficult and dangerous, there are grounds for cautious optimism that we can end this terrible tragedy and bring security to the people of Kosovo and stability to the Balkans?

Mr. Robertson: I thank my hon. Friend for those comments, and I recall the memorable speech that he made in one of our many debates on this subject. We must look forward, but cautious optimism is all that we should feel at present. There are many tasks ahead.

Mr. Andrew Tyrie (Chichester): I should like to take the Secretary of State forward a few weeks. If, after the deployment of troops by the west and Russia, there is a relapse in Milosevic's commitment to the agreement, does the Secretary of State think it is feasible that, with Russian troops on the ground, bombing could be resumed in order to secure Milosevic's compliance? Have there been any discussions with the Russians to deal with such an eventuality? If such negotiations have not taken place, is there not a risk that the Russians could acquire an effective veto on further action to secure Milosevic's compliance?

Mr. Robertson: If there are Russian troops on the ground, British troops will also be on the ground. British, Russian and troops from other NATO countries will be on the ground because the Serbs have withdrawn. As General Jackson made absolutely clear tonight, where appropriate, the air assault could take place over Yugoslavia where much attention has been paid in recent times. That is not being bloodthirsty or bloodcurdling, and I do not seek to humiliate Serbia. However, the Serbs must recognise that they have signed an agreement and that the sanction remains that brought them to the negotiating table in the first place.

Perhaps those who want to talk about Russian vetoes should look carefully at the role played by the Russians in recent days. Mr. Ivanov, the Russian Foreign Minister, was there when we secured the first G8 statement; Mr. Chernomyrdin was instrumental in securing the Belgrade agreement; and Mr. Ivanov was also involved in obtaining the draft Security Council resolution yesterday. I pay a tribute this evening to the Russians and the role that they have played in bringing peace to the Balkans. That is a great indication of how the east and the west can co-operate to ensure that we live in a much safer, more stable and more civilised world.

Fiona Mactaggart (Slough): Like most other hon. Members, I begin by congratulating the Secretary of State and all those who have been involved in this process. I look forward to an outcome about which I think all hon. Members are united: the return of the refugees. Is the Secretary of State confident that, as well as the military arrangements to secure Kosovo, there are sufficient arrangements to ensure that the refugees know what is happening? I bet that that group of people is not

cautiously optimistic but desperate, over-excited, frightened and worried about whether other villagers will return before they do. Communication with refugees in the camps will be crucial in managing the process and making it work. I seek my right hon. Friend's assurance that the processes will be in place to achieve that objective.

Mr. Robertson: My hon. Friend makes a very important point. I agree that we must keep the refugees informed. We have taken this action on their behalf, but that does not mean that they do not have a role to play. We made the refugees a promise—personally and collectively—that we would get them home, and some will be desperate to return, even though they know that the circumstances may be dire and dangerous. I know that it is high on General Jackson's agenda to ensure that communication is right and proper and that people know what is happening. It will take a lot of energy on the part of the international community to ensure that all the interlocking factors work together so that we can get the refugees back home—if we can, before the winter sets in.

Mr. Gerald Howarth (Aldershot): May I say to the Secretary of State that we particularly appreciate his coming to the House tonight at this late hour to make a statement and take questions? Perhaps some of his colleagues could follow his example. It is fair to say that throughout this conflict he has always sought to keep the House informed, which is appreciated.

The right hon. Gentleman is right to be cautious about what lies ahead and to pay tribute to our forces on the ground, particularly General Sir Mike Jackson. I am sure that the right hon. Gentleman would agree that they face an extremely risky undertaking with land mines having been indiscriminately planted and other possible problems with the Kosovo Liberation Army or dissident forces thereof.

Although the Secretary of State was unable to answer the point made by my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Sleaford and North Hykeham (Mr. Hogg), and rightly drew attention to tomorrow's debate, he must have had some idea, in the run-up to the agreement, about whether he would need to deploy extra forces. Does he intend to call up Territorial Army reservists? Can he give us an idea of how long he expects our forces to stay out there, given that, for example, some of 5 Airborne Brigade and the 1st Battalion of the Parachute Regiment, which are based in Aldershot, have been on extensive training and other missions and would like to know for how long they are likely to be away?

Mr. Robertson: I say to the hon. Gentleman that there is nobody in the Ministry of Defence who considers 10.46 pm to be late at night, but it is nice to see him here at this late hour. I know that his questions about the Parachute Regiment have absolutely nothing to do with his being the Member for Aldershot. I spoke yesterday to the men of 1 Para and their distinguished commanding officer, Colonel Paul Gibson, at their training camp. They are absolutely raring to go and to do the job for which they have been training so extensively. Yes, that will be risky and dangerous, as I made clear. The men know that and they are trained to deal with such a situation.

By the end of this week, we shall have about 13,000 British troops in Macedonia, ready to go in when General Jackson gives the call. Large numbers of German and French troops are already there. More German, French and Canadian troops are about to land in Greece to go up into Macedonia. The United States marine expeditionary unit is also on its way and will be in theatre.

I cannot say how long people will be there. I cannot say what they will see, and I do not know what they will find when they cross the border into Kosovo. They will do their job and they will come back home as quickly as they can. Those who serve with the allied rapid reaction corps HQ are, of course, usually deployed for six months. Presumably, the clock will start ticking on that six months when the accord is passed, if it is passed, by the North Atlantic Council. Those men will be looking forward to that period of deployment being over, but, at the moment, they look forward to an engagement that will take all the skills, resolution and guts that they so legendarily have.

Mr. Tony Baldry (Banbury): May I take the Secretary of State back to a comment about the regular reserve and the Territorial Army? Clearly, policing and preserving the peace will require the support and services of many men and women. It will almost certainly require the support of members of the regular reserve and the TA, particularly those with specialist trades and skills. Many of those men and women have already given six months' voluntary service in Bosnia. Against that background, will the Secretary of State assure the House that if he calls on members of the TA to serve in Kosovo, he will use his powers under the Reserve Forces (Safeguard of Employment) Act 1985 to ensure that their occupations and pensions are protected while they are serving in this endeavour?

Mr. Robertson: I pay tribute to the hon. Gentleman's connection with the Territorial Army. We are very conscious of our responsibilities for the regular reserve and the TA. Some 10 per cent. of our forces in Bosnia come from the TA. If we need to deploy reserves and the TA to Kosovo—although that decision will ultimately be mine, the recommendation will come from the forces—we shall bear all the relevant factors very much in mind.

Mr. Christopher Fraser (Mid-Dorset and North Poole): In the light of this new situation, has the Prime Minister flown out to Kumanovo in Macedonia? If he has not, does he intend to do so?

Mr. Robertson: I was out in Macedonia yesterday. Frankly, the last thing that they need out there are more VIPs descending on them. We can quite effectively send our good wishes to them—and we have, and we will. I know the presence of the Prime Minister in Macedonia was deeply appreciated and had a huge morale-boosting effect not just our troops but on the refugees whom he met. I have gone on a number of visits during this conflict, and—I think—for the very first time in any conflict in which our troops have been engaged, I took Opposition Front Benchers to ensure that our troops knew that not just the Government but the people of this country supported them.

Mr. Bob Russell (Colchester): I am sure that the Secretary of State agrees that the widely felt relief has special significance in garrison towns. I follow the comments of the hon. Member for Aldershot (Mr. Howarth) in saying that there are already troops

[Mr. Bob Russell]

from Colchester garrison in Macedonia. Indeed, I understand that several hundred more will be going. Does the Secretary of State agree that overstretch will be even more critical? If the short term becomes the long term, as it did in Bosnia, is there not a strong case for encouraging more of our European allies to relieve the pressures in Bosnia, so that British troops are not overstretched throughout the Balkans?

Mr. Robertson: Yes is the answer. We will ensure that all the European countries involved make a contribution. That is why I pay tribute to all those who have been engaged: the American pilots who have flown two thirds of the planes in the air campaign, the large number of NATO European ships in the naval presence and the thousands of European troops. They all have a role to play. The hon. Gentleman's presence as the representative of a garrison town reminds me to do one thing that I should have done a long time ago: pay a tribute to the families of the service personnel involved, who sit at home, worrying and concerned. They are making a huge contribution and a great sacrifice on behalf of the country. They are all hugely important. We think of them all the time. They are very much part and parcel of whatever policy we have for the armed forces.

NORTHERN IRELAND GRAND COMMITTEE

Motion made, and Question put forthwith, pursuant to Standing Order No. 116 (Northern Ireland Grand Committee (sittings)),

That—

(1) the matter of the consultation document 'Life Long Learning—a new Learning Culture for All' be referred to the Northern Ireland Grand Committee for its consideration;

(2) at the sitting on Thursday 24th June, the Committee shall take questions for oral answer and shall then consider the matter referred to it under paragraph (1) above;

(3) at the conclusion of those proceedings, a Motion for the adjournment of the Committee may be made by a Minister of the Crown, pursuant to Standing Order No. 116(5).—*[Mr. Dowd.]*

Question agreed to.

JOINT COMMITTEE ON THE DRAFT LOCAL GOVERNMENT (FUNCTIONS AND STANDARDS) BILL

Ordered,

That Mr. Robin Corbett be discharged from the Committee on the draft Local Government (Functions and Standards) Bill and Mr. John Smith be added to the Committee.—*[Mr. Dowd.]*

PETITION

Health Food Products

10.53 pm

Valerie Davey (Bristol, West): As sometimes happens in this House, we go from a matter of international magnitude to one of national and local detail.

I am pleased to present the petition of the Health Food Manufacturers Association on behalf of 1,780 petitioners who live in Bristol, West and/or use one of the excellent health food stores in the constituency.

The petition declares:

Government proposals would give the Medicines Control Agency virtually unlimited powers to classify safe products as medicines. This would mean that the MCA could remove at a stroke products that are vital to the good health of many consumers and are currently sold under food law. This is an abuse of the democratic process and a denial of freedom of choice.

The Petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urge the Department of Health to reconsider the proposals and to introduce an immediate moratorium preventing the MCA from declaring these safe products to be medicines except on the grounds of illegal claims or safety and, further, to introduce new legislation appropriate to the special needs of safe, natural health products.

And the petitioners remain, etc.

To lie upon the Table.

Media Standards

Motion made, and Question proposed, That this House do now adjourn.—*[Mr. Dowd.]*

10.54 pm

Mr. George Galloway (Glasgow, Kelvin): I must declare an interest, although I do so with some trepidation in the presence of my hon. Friend the Minister for Tourism, Film and Broadcasting. As the Register of Members' Interests shows, I myself am a journalist—a newspaper columnist, nowadays on *The Mail on Sunday* and the Catholic newspaper *Flourish*. I hope that my hon. Friend will accept it from me that, on at least one of those newspapers, my own views are not always necessarily the views of the management.

I should start by saying what my speech is not about, for there has been some media interest in that. It is not about outlining a litany of complaints about my own experiences with the media; there is not enough time for that. Regardless, I know the way to the libel courts, and am represented by Davenport Lyons—the legendary "Sue, Grabbit and Runne" of *Private Eye* fame. Besides, some of those experiences are more hurtful than others.

My last close encounter with the gutter press consisted of a 6 ft-tall young Cuban mulatta, purchased by the *News of the World* to say—in colour, on pages 1, 2 and 3—that I was

"good looking . . . had a good body for my age . . . and did it with her five times a night under the Caribbean stars."

That is the type of slander that some of us have to put up with.

Neither is my speech about making a case against self-regulation, for Government intervention, for new legislation on privacy, or about anything like that. I am one of the very few surviving opponents of the last attempt at a privacy law—which was piloted by the least plausible advocate of such a thing, the former Member for Winchester, Mr. John Browne.

I have not changed my mind since then about the fact that there is no editor so venal that I should prefer to see a Minister—any Minister of any Government—sitting in that editor's chair, or making his or her editorial decisions. I have visited too many countries where the deadest hand on freedom is that of the censor—the Minister of Information, the proverbial "Minister for Truth"—to wish to see us go even an inch down that road.

It is, moreover, not true that the current arrangements, in the form of the Press Complaints Commission, are a failure. In fact, in the first decade of the PCC's existence, four fifths of all complaints have been resolved bilaterally between newspaper and complainant. While, of course, there can always be improvements—I have some suggestions to make in that regard—our system of self-regulation is currently being studied by many people around the world who are trying to balance the precious, indeed fundamental, freedom of the press with the need to avoid cruel and gratuitous intrusion. Tomorrow, at the Law Society, in Chancery lane, representatives of 20 press councils, from Estonia to Iceland, will be conferring on the best way of reconciling those matters, and will very much use the British experience as a suitable case for study.

Lately, several controversies have clearly generated a great deal of heat. However, there has been more heat than light. In the murk, some people have suggested changes to the self-regulatory framework which, while superficially attractive, do not really stand up to scrutiny. Some people, including noble Friends in the other place, seem to favour a "proactive PCC", which could trigger investigations itself, rather than being dependent on an alleged victim of abuse of the code making a complaint. However, that in itself could be an intrusion.

Many people—such as the comedian Harry Enfield, whose honeymoon was crudely interrupted by British tabloid paparazzi; or my hon. Friend the Member for Stevenage (Barbara Follett), whose holiday was similarly marred—despite their justifiable anger, have no wish to prolong their agony or widen the audience for their embarrassment by making a complaint. Moreover, it would clearly represent a type of double jeopardy if the PCC, acting in what it thought was the public good, were to ride unasked to their defence. Regardless, such people could well be on their way to the libel courts, or have others reasons why they do not wish to become a "proactive PCC" cause celebre.

A more engaged PCC more closely in tune with the industry and public attitudes and with a more hands-on chairman would be a good idea. I mean no disrespect to Lord Wakeham when I say that he is rather a figure from another age. Given that, among many other duties, he heads the royal commission investigating the future shape of the upper House of the British Parliament, he must be one of the country's busiest men. It would be preferable to have someone more steeped in the argot of the British press who would have more of a common and political touch, from which the standing of the PCC in the country would benefit.

There is also a case to answer in that some victims of abuse of the code are afraid to register a complaint for fear that the tabloids will vindictively pursue them. The code needs adjusting to make it clear that any such vindictive pursuit of a complainant would seriously exacerbate a newspaper's position and would be the subject of more serious sanction.

Similarly, the code needs to take account of the recidivist behaviour of some newspapers under some editors. It is surely unacceptable for breach after breach of the code to occur, with punishment no more severe than the publication of an adjudication tucked away on page 32 of the paper. The PCC should adopt a "three strikes and you're out" approach. If a newspaper was found on a second occasion in 12 months to have broken the code to which it had voluntarily subscribed, it should be required to publish the adjudication on the front page with an apology from the proprietor and the editor. If a third breach occurred within 12 months—we should remember that each editor is required in their contract of employment to comply with the code—it should be incumbent on the proprietor to dismiss the editor.

The code and the PCC are most seriously falling short of public expectation in what can loosely be described as entrapment. There are all kinds of entrapment for all kinds of purposes. Few would dispute that *The Sunday Times* was justified in its entrapment of Members of this House found to be accepting cash payments for asking parliamentary questions, or that *The Guardian* was right to deploy a cod fax to help get to the bottom of who really paid Jonathan Aitken's hotel bill at the Ritz. Not all subterfuge should be frowned on, but there must be a clear and undeniable public interest that overrides most people's natural queasiness about such tactics. Above all,

[Mr. George Galloway]

there must be no active commissioning of wrong-doing that would not otherwise have taken place. As we shall see, that is by no means always the case.

I shall concentrate on one newspaper—the aforementioned *News of the World*—and two cases in particular. One involves a minor celebrity who is now a guest of Her Majesty's prison service. The other involves a previously unknown couple, Sue and Bob, the owners of a two-star naturist English boarding house. Many of us must have been intrigued over the years about whether the famously intrepid *News of the World* investigators really made their excuses and left the scenes of depravity that they were helpfully bringing to our attention. Sue and Bob, armed with audio and visual aids, answered that question, at least as far as the chief crime reporter of the *News of the World*, Neville Thurlbeck, was concerned. After he had plastered on a double-page spread a story entitled "The guesthouse where all rooms come with en suite pervert", he was unmasked by the couple's videotape as the pervert who badgered, begged and finally bribed Bob and Sue into allowing him to indulge in a rather pathetic act of onanism at the foot of their bed.

Despite the *News of the World* being caught bang to rights in that case, the PCC refused even to consider the couple's complaint in one of its most spineless failures of the decade. The presence on the board of the PCC of Mr. Phil Hall, the editor of the *News of the World*, scarcely persuaded those two private citizens that self-regulation would do it for them.

Even more serious is the case of the minor television actor, John Alford, from the series "London's Burning". He is currently serving a prison sentence for supplying 2g of cocaine, having been entrapped by the chief investigative editor of the *News of the World*, Mahzer Mahmood. Mahmood posed, as is his habit, as an Arab prince with a retinue of followers. I know some Arab princes—some are my friends—and Mahzer Mahmood is no Arab prince. He was dismissed by *The Sunday Times* for dishonesty and for seeking to persuade workmates to behave dishonestly in order to cover up his misdemeanours. Nevertheless, that man is given apparently unlimited budgets to trap a long succession of dupes, from the directors of Newcastle United football club to young and greedy actors such as John Alford.

Mahmood took a suite in the Savoy hotel and dressed in the clothes of a prince of Arabia. For more than two weeks, he seduced Alford, chauffeuring him around in his hired Rolls-Royce and laying before him the mirage of the riches of Croesus, which could be his just for being the prince's friend and appearing at a non-existent festival in the Gulf.

Finally, when he had Alford eating out of his hand, he popped the question and asked if Alford knew where he could get some cocaine. As Alford said in his speech from the dock, he would never have dreamed of making this transaction if his friend, the Arab prince, whom he thought was going to be the making of him, had not asked him to do so. He said, and he was surely right, that the *News of the World* had manufactured the crime rather than reported it. Mahmood got his story and young Alford got a jail sentence and the ruination of his professional and, who knows, even his personal life.

Surely the entrapment of people into committing offences is a matter for the criminal law and a matter for the Government to consider seriously. The law was an ass when it imprisoned John Alford, and justice was not done.

Of course, there is a great deal of hypocrisy in the press about the taking of recreational drugs. I could, if I were minded, draw the House's attention to important luminaries of the fourth estate who are no strangers to such illicit substances. There is something especially piquant about Mr. Murdoch's newspapers' resorting to these extraordinary lengths to prove that the most obscure individuals, whom they ludicrously dub as "role models", indulge themselves in this way.

Let me tell the House about Mr. Matthew Freud. I understand that he is now a successful public relations man and friend of the famous. Back in the 1980s, Mr. Freud found himself in the dog house, in front of a judge who fined him £500 and told him he was a "very foolish young man" for supplying 3.19g of a powder containing cocaine.

Mr. Murdoch, nowadays a papal knight, must have discovered the importance of penitence and redemption, at least as it affects his family. The same Mr. Freud is now the consort and live-in lover of Miss Elizabeth Murdoch who will one day inherit the very same *News of the World* in which princes of the press such as Mahzer Mahmood get high, laying in wait for fools whom they can entrap into supplying them with their powders.

In conclusion, I turn to the latest and arguably the greatest blunder by the tabloids—the sensational splash of seaside pictures of Sophie Rhys-Jones. That gross and tasteless act, in this case by another of Mr. Murdoch's flagships, *The Sun*, was a good old-fashioned story of personal betrayal, chequebook journalism and grotesque editorial misjudgment.

Far from having a melancholy ending, I believe that the humiliating climbdown by the editor of *The Sun*, David Yelland, was a triumph of the most important and safest form of sanction against unworthy journalism: the power of the people. The wave of angry public disapproval and the concentrated fire of the more respectable press secured quick and spectacular justice for the blameless Miss Rhys-Jones. People voting with their feet and their pockets against such journalism will always be the way of dragging the rudest red-top papers back out of the gutter.

11.11 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport (Janet Anderson): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow, Kelvin (Mr. Galloway) on securing tonight's debate. I note that he says that the views of the newspapers for which he writes do not always coincide with his own. He also said that he would not dwell on his own experience at the hands of the media because we did not have sufficient time. For the same reason, I will not dwell on my experience of the media.

I am not the first Minister to respond to a debate in the House on the issue and I am sure that I will not be the last. I am only sorry that there are not more members of the press present to hear tonight's important debate.

Recent behaviour of certain sections of the press has provoked concerns in the House and renewed, in some quarters, calls for greater controls on the press. I also

know that many in the House are of the view that sections of the press have recently gone way beyond the spirit and the letter of the Press Complaints Commission's code of practice, and I have some sympathy with those views. However, my hon. Friend will agree that we must avoid knee-jerk responses. As we have all too often seen in the past, such responses rarely, if ever, result in an effective solution to a perceived problem.

We should also remind ourselves that a free press remains the cornerstone of our democracy. Quite simply, we cannot have a free democratic society without a free press.

We can justifiably be proud of a long tradition of press freedom in this country. Since 1696, there has been no Executive intervention in the content of newspapers in peacetime. Newspapers are, and should remain, independent of government. It should be for the press to decide what and what not to publish, subject to the general law.

The press has frequently demonstrated that it is a powerful force for good in our society and the Government are committed to preserving the freedom necessary for it to fulfil its proper role. That is why we have repeatedly stated our preference for self-regulation—a position that my hon. Friend will support. We have expressed reluctance to introduce statutory regulation or a privacy law. At present, the Government have no plans, nor see any pressing reason, to introduce legislation to regulate the press.

Under the present system of self-regulation, the Press Complaints Commission seeks to conciliate between those who are aggrieved about alleged press abuses and the newspaper concerned, and, where that fails, to adjudicate according to a code of practice that has been agreed by the newspaper and magazine industry.

The code, to which my hon. Friend referred, covers many different issues, including intrusion into privacy, intrusion into grief or shock, opportunity to reply, payment for articles and, above all, inaccuracy. The PCC published a revised code of practice on 19 December 1997, with increased safeguards against intrusion and harassment, and protections for children. Most of the matters are not covered by the criminal or civil law, and thus the present arrangements give people an avenue of complaint that would not otherwise be available and which is fairly rapid and free. It is important to note that the great majority of those who complain to the PCC are satisfied with the outcome.

That is not to say that the Government believe that self-regulation is working perfectly. The Government expect the press to abide by the rules and commitments enshrined in the code of practice, and we continue to review the effectiveness of press self-regulation by monitoring alleged press abuses and the PCC's handling of them.

Ministers and my officials are in regular contact with the PCC to discuss a number of issues. The Government have repeatedly stated our desire to see further improvements to self-regulation. We have no hesitation in suggesting such improvements to both the PCC's operations and the code, as and when we think necessary. I thank my hon. Friend for his contribution to that process.

From my discussions with the noble Lord Wakeham, I know that he welcomes this continuing dialogue, and he is always open to considering suggested improvements to the code. However, we should recognise that any improvements are likely to be most effective if they are made with the general consent of the press. I do not underestimate the difficulty of achieving that.

I am grateful to my hon. Friend for raising this important issue. I recognise that the behaviour of certain elements of the press has, in recent weeks, caused concern and distress to many—my hon. Friend mentioned some of those instances—but I do not believe that that should lead us to conclude that the time for statutory regulation is right. In my view, self-regulation continues to be the best way in which to ensure high editorial standards in this country. Let us not forget that, despite the occasional lapse, the history of the press over the last decade or so has been, by and large, one of continued responsible improvement.

The Government continue to be committed to monitoring the effectiveness of the current self-regulatory system. I thank my hon. Friend again for his suggestions and comments on the code, breaches of the code and possible punishment for such breaches, and I thank him particularly for what he says about entrapment, about which there has been great concern in recent weeks.

I noted with interest what my hon. Friend said about whether the PCC should be able to initiate its own investigations without a complaint being made to it, and he made a valid point in support of the present system. Recent events will feed into the continuing monitoring process that the Government will carry out in terms of the effectiveness of the system. In my opinion, the basic rationale for self-regulation has not been damaged by those recent events.

I conclude by quoting from an editorial in *The Observer* on 30 May, which said:

> "A free press, warts and all, is an indispensable component of democracy. If we some saw some warts last week, don't forget that wider truth."

In what has been a difficult few weeks for the press, that is a sentiment with which I hope most hon. Members can concur. Once again, I thank my hon. Friend for raising this important issue. I assure him that we will take note of everything that he said during the debate.

Question put and agreed to.

Adjourned accordingly at nineteen minutes past Eleven o'clock.

House of Commons

Thursday 10 June 1999

The House met at half-past Eleven o'clock

PRAYERS

[MADAM SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

Oral Answers to Questions

EDUCATION AND EMPLOYMENT

The Secretary of State was asked—

Numeracy Hour

1. **Helen Jones** (Warrington, North): What assessment he has made of the effectiveness of the numeracy hour; and if he will make a statement. [85393]

The Secretary of State for Education and Employment (Mr. David Blunkett): The national numeracy project has been evaluated by the National Foundation for Educational Research in England and Wales. Seven hundred and fifty schools took part in the project. Using a baseline of two years earlier with similar children, there was up to a 16-month improvement in the performance of those who had been part of that programme.

Helen Jones: I am grateful to my right hon. Friend for that reply. Would he agree that, if the numeracy project is to be effective, one of the essential ingredients is for staff to be properly trained and supported? Will he join me in congratulating teachers on the work that they have done so far on the various initiatives that the Government have introduced? Will he take this opportunity to assure the House that proper support and training will be provided for the introduction of the numeracy hour in all our schools?

Mr. Blunkett: I am very pleased to give that assurance. The evaluation of the project undertaken by Ofsted shows that teachers were able to plan, organise and teach mathematics much more effectively. Obviously, training teachers is a crucial factor. We have put £55 million into training and materials for the programme and 1,760 extra teachers are providing model lessons. Teachers in every school in the country—including the head and a governor—will have the opportunity to receive the necessary training in the months ahead. We have expanded by one day the number of training days available this summer to facilitate the training programme. As teachers become more familiar with the numeracy programme, the sort of figures that we have seen for the literacy hour will be reflected—90 per cent. of primary teachers have said that they found that framework helpful and positive and have welcomed it.

Single Work-focused Gateway

2. **Mr. John Healey** (Wentworth): What assessment he has made of the role of local authorities in the planning and delivery of the pilots for the single work-focused gateway. [85394]

The Minister for Employment, Welfare to Work and Equal Opportunities (Mr. Andrew Smith): Local authorities have been encouraged to be full partners in the new one service. They are represented on the national project team and on local implementation teams. Due to the demanding time scales to which we are working to get the pilots up and running in June and November, it made sense to allow for the phasing in of the councils' service involvement, but some council staff, premises and functions will be involved from day 1 and their contribution is invaluable.

Mr. Healey: I thank my right hon. Friend for that answer. Is he aware that the Education and Employment Select Committee recently took evidence from the Local Government Association on our inquiry into the single work-focused gateway? Is he aware that, while the LGA strongly supports the ambition of the one service, it told us of the pilots whose participants felt that they had been invited to join the train but that it had already left the station and was 2 miles down the track? In the light of that, will my right hon. Friend explain what efforts have been made to ensure that local authority staff have been open to recruitment as one service advisers? Are there any local authority sites from which the one service will be delivered in the pilot areas?

Mr. Smith: Not only has the association been invited to join the train, it is on the train. The LGA is fully involved. Local authority staff have been encouraged to apply for jobs as personal advisers in the new one service and a number have already been appointed. Yes, local authority premises will be used from day one, including in some towns where there has been no access to benefit and employment services. As I said in my earlier answer, there will be an opportunity for councils to pace the extension of their involvement over time—something that the councils very much wanted—so that it accords with their own priorities. Also, discussions on resourcing are taking place so that local authorities will be resourced in relation to their involvement on the same basis as the Benefits Agency and the Employment Service.

Masterclasses

3. **Mr. Ben Chapman** (Wirral, South): How many schools are piloting the use of masterclasses for more able pupils. [85395]

The Minister for School Standards (Ms Estelle Morris): Ten schools are involved in the pilot of masterclasses for gifted and talented pupils. We are also developing a separate pilot of about 40 summer school projects, based in a range of schools and education action zones. Further details will be announced shortly.

Mr. Chapman: We still need to improve the education of all our children and to provide lifelong learning for others, but are not special measures needed for gifted and

talented children, in particular in inner-city areas, as they are still not given the priority that they deserve? What are my hon. Friend's plans for masterclasses for those gifted children and for ensuring that those are more widely available?

Ms Morris: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. For too long, there has been the feeling that able children will do well despite school rather than because of it. It is about time that we recognised the fact that allowing every child to reach their potential means giving attention to every child, including those who have a particular ability or talent. My hon. Friend will know that a key strand of our work on the excellence in schools project is to ask those participating to work with their most able, gifted and talented children to ensure that they achieve their potential and that they achieve at a level that has not until now been available to them.

Mrs. Ann Winterton (Congleton): I recognise that masterclasses may indeed be beneficial for the more gifted child, and no doubt the trials will be carefully evaluated, but does the Minister recognise that able and gifted children should be assisted in mainstream education and that, from the word, go there should be streaming in secondary schools to ensure that those children are given the challenges that they need? Does she further agree that perhaps, in addition, special help could be provided at the end of the school day to continue that impetus?

Ms Morris: I agree with a great deal of what the hon. Lady has just said. It is absolutely crucial that the needs of those children in mainstream schools, whether primary or secondary, are met. For too long, schools have been good at meeting the needs of children who are thought to be less able and struggling—which is right and may it continue—but have often left those who are doing well to get on at their own pace. We are looking for a change of culture. We need to work with schools and teachers so that they develop strategies and teaching styles that will extend the abilities and the potential of every young person.

Every school should look carefully at pupil grouping. Certainly there is a lot of evidence showing that setting children can raise standards. That is setting children by ability for different subjects rather than streaming children, to which the hon. Lady referred, which puts them into the same stream for all subjects. Again, under the excellence in cities initiative, we are requiring all schools to look carefully at the way in which they group students and seriously to consider setting, unless they can prove to us that another way of grouping children is achieving the same high results.

Mr. Malcolm Wicks (Croydon, North): I welcome the Minister's responses to these questions. As she knows, the Select Committee on Education and Employment recently published a report on the needs of highly able children. I agree with her comments that we have tended to neglect this group because of the concern about struggling children and average standards. Does she agree that, although the masterclass initiative is a very important one, perhaps the key, as the Select Committee suggests, would be for every school to have a policy for highly able children and probably a named senior member of staff with special responsibility so that that group is no longer neglected?

Ms Morris: That is absolutely right. I welcome the Select Committee report on gifted and talented children and I look forward to my appearance before the Committee in about four weeks' time. The main theme of the report is absolutely right: in all our schools there are able and talented students who need to be recognised and supported. I know that the Chair of the Select Committee will welcome the fact that, as part of excellence in schools, we are requiring every school in the 25 pilot areas to designate one member of staff to be responsible for monitoring gifted and able children. Over the next few months, we will draw those teachers together, provide them with training and make links so that they can support each other. I have every confidence in saying that much that the Committee espouses in training will be delivered through excellence in cities over the next 12 months.

Mrs. Theresa May (Maidenhead): The masterclass initiative and the excellence in cities initiative, which includes masterclasses, are, like so many Government initiatives, strong on rhetoric and weak on delivery. How many children will be moved to another school for some part of their education as a result of these initiatives? The Minister has talked today of the need to meet the needs of more able pupils, but the masterclass initiative within excellence in cities is based on selection by ability. Last week, the Prime Minister told head teachers that there should be no return to selection by ability because it was too devastating for those who were rejected. What confidence can parents, pupils and teachers have in statements made by the Secretary of State and the Minister on meeting the needs of more able pupils when the Prime Minister so obviously disagrees with them?

Ms Morris: I find it amazing that the hon. Lady has failed to grasp the central difference between her policy for gifted and talented children and that of the Government. Unlike the Opposition, we do not believe that gifted and talented children exist only in selective schools. We believe that, in every school, there are groups of children who are gifted and talented and whose needs have been ignored. The thrust of our policy is to ensure that a gifted and talented child does not have to be in a grammar school to get extra support. That will give parents confidence that, whether their child goes to an existing selective school or to a comprehensive school in a city or a rural area, there will be policies to support the child in realising their potential. That is what parents want—not a few children siphoned off for extra attention.

Longer-term Unemployed

4. **Mr. David Stewart** (Inverness, East, Nairn and Lochaber): What steps he is taking to help the longer-term unemployed. [85396]

The Secretary of State for Education and Employment (Mr. David Blunkett): With the excellent policies of the Chancellor of the Exchequer, the Employment Service and the new deal are already delivering to young and older unemployed people. We now have the best record in terms of the number and

percentage of people in employment in our history. We have the lowest youth unemployment for 25 years. There has been a 40 per cent. drop in long-term young unemployment. We have seen 266,000 young people go into the gateway, with 95,000 getting jobs, of which 70,000 have been sustained. The £3.6 billion that we are putting in is the wisest and most effective investment ever on unemployment.

Mr. Stewart: I thank my right hon. Friend for that reply. Does he share my concern about ageism in the workplace? I recently met a 50-year-old insurance manager who had been unemployed for two years and felt that he would never work again because of such ageism. Will the Government's new code of practice outlaw age discrimination in the workplace?

Mr. Blunkett: My right hon. Friend the Minister for Employment, Welfare to Work and Equal Opportunities will launch the code in a few days. He will spell out our measures for working with industry and commerce to build on some of the excellent examples of which my hon. Friend will know in Scotland. There, the older workers unemployed subsidy for start-up pension funds, the older is bolder programme of workshops to raise employers' awareness of older workers and the 50-plus initiative—pilots for which will be rolled out in the autumn as in the rest of the United Kingdom—will all take head on the problem of ensuring that older people are not neglected. As some of us get older, we feel this more strongly day by day.

Mr. John Bercow (Buckingham): The right hon. Gentleman's response to the hon. Member for Inverness, East, Nairn and Lochaber (Mr. Stewart) notwithstanding, will he abandon his self-satisfaction and acknowledge that the Government are guilty of the most monstrous age discrimination imaginable? They are spending just short of £2.6 billion to assist the 118,000 young people who qualify under the new deal, but less than £500 million on the 194,500 older unemployed people. When will he put his own house in order and explain exactly what he has against older people who suffer the misfortune of unemployment?

Mr. Blunkett: The hon. Gentleman has not counted all the existing and newly developed measures outside the new deal that the Employment Service is adequately and effectively implementing for older workers. He ignores the fact that, under the new deal 25-plus, 10,600 older men and women have entered work. The 28 major programmes that have been put in place on the British mainland are already showing just how effective they can be. The performance and innovation unit has been commissioned to identify ways of increasing the effectiveness of our policies and opportunities for older people. I would welcome all parties in the House making a positive contribution to improving the well-being and opportunities of older workers rather than griping about the success of the Government.

Mr. Barry Jones (Alyn and Deeside): May I say to my right hon. Friend that you are only as old as you feel? He seems to be carrying the burdens of office very well.

In 1980, my constituency suffered the largest post-war redundancy in western Europe when 8,000 steelworkers, together with many thousands of others in associated work lost their jobs overnight. Some of those steelworkers still have no work largely because there are fewer and fewer unskilled jobs. Will my right hon. Friend tell the House and my constituents of any progress that he is making in assisting older redundant steelworkers to find new work?

Mr. Blunkett: I thank my hon. Friend for his flattery about my ageing process—some days are better than others, Madam Speaker.

I agree with my hon. Friend—how could I not, coming from a steel area myself?—about the challenge of ensuring that the reskilling programme is available. We place great emphasis on that investment in training for older workers. The 50-plus initiative, which was announced in the March Budget, will be of particular help to older workers who have spent their life in heavy industry; their futures will be enhanced by those measures, as they will by the reports and recommendations of the skills task force, which we established when we took office. I hope to announce new measures shortly that will enhance still further the available training opportunities.

Measures will also be proposed in a White Paper, which we hope to publish in a few weeks, on a coherent programme, policy and funding for all post-16 education and training.

Mr. Roy Beggs (East Antrim): I pay tribute to the measures taken by the Government to date to tackle the scourge of unemployment. We have had good success in Northern Ireland, and I welcome the continuing fall in its unemployment rate. When considering further measures to assist the longer-term unemployed, will the Secretary of State consider the unintended consequences for experienced teachers of local management of schools funding? Those teachers now have great difficulty finding long-term secure contracts and they may risk joining the ranks of the long-term unemployed.

Mr. Blunkett: We are mindful of the need to retain the services of long-serving and experienced teachers and measures that have been set in place in broader policies are aimed at doing precisely that. I am happy to talk to my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland about the matter. We have introduced greater flexibility for local authorities and schools so that they can vary the formulas for LMS and fair funding to take account of salary levels and the need to retain teachers who are more expensive because of their long service and grading. That will avoid precisely the danger that the hon. Gentleman describes. It is why additional money is being provided for posts for teachers with advanced skills. It is why the Government's Green Paper on reforming the promotion prospects and rewards for teachers will specifically earmark money to fund those initiatives so that money does not have to be found from existing resources.

Mr. Damian Green (Ashford): The Secretary of State has referred to the new deal as a great help to the long-term unemployed. Can he explain why his Cabinet colleagues evidently do not agree? The numbers of young new deal trainees taken on by Government Departments make fascinating reading. The Department for Culture, Media and Sport and the Department for International

Development have taken on none. The Lord Chancellor's Department has taken on none. The Northern Ireland Office has taken on none. Even the Home Office, with its 50,818 employees, has taken on just one. Why should the long-term unemployed take the new deal seriously if the Government, when acting as employer, regard it as completely irrelevant?

Mr. Blunkett: I am grateful for the reminder to all Departments—we have issued exactly such a reminder ourselves—of the importance of their role in such schemes. [*Laughter.*] Well, we are almost at the end of term when we usually get reports that say, "Doing extraordinarily well, but some classmates could do better." That assessment would probably be appropriate. We are, however, making fantastic progress. We are about to reach the 50,000 mark in terms of the number of employers who have signed up. Not only are a range of Departments taking on new dealers, but their agencies and the bodies that they fund are doing so as well. It ill becomes anyone to chide the Lord Chancellor for whom he takes on, given the difficulty that he has experienced in appointing a special adviser.

Former Grant-maintained Schools

5. **Mr. Desmond Swayne** (New Forest, West): If he will make a statement about progress in implementing his funding policy in respect of former grant-maintained schools. [85397]

The Minister for School Standards (Ms Estelle Morris): The Government's aim is to establish a unified funding system for all state schools involving higher delegation by local education authorities and funding for all schools on an equal basis. We have put transitional arrangements in place to ensure that the changes required of grant-maintained schools are manageable.

Mr. Swayne: One of my more distasteful duties is to answer letters sent to me by parents who were unable to secure a place for their children at the Arnewood secondary school in New Milton, despite the fact that they live in the catchment area. Similar problems attend the Burgate school in Fordingbridge and Ringwood school. Although those are three of the most successful comprehensive schools in the country, they now face cutting courses and staff and even charging for some lessons. In total, grant-maintained schools have lost £100 million. The former Minister for School Standards, now the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry, said that it was not the Government's intention

"to cut the amount being spent on pupils in GM schools but to increase the funding . . . in other schools. We are . . . levelling up."—[*Official Report, Standing Committee A*, 12 February 1998; c. 461.]

Is that loss the meaning of levelling up?

Ms Morris: If the hon. Gentleman has any evidence that any school in his constituency is charging pupils for attending lessons, I trust that he will bring it to our attention immediately. It is illegal, and I should be totally surprised if it were going on. I hope that he will help us in upholding the law in that regard.

The hon. Gentleman has written to me about what has happened to Arnewood school's budget this year. I, too, have duties—distasteful or otherwise—in replying to letters from Members of Parliament, so he will be aware that the school's budget has been protected in cash terms. Much of the change for Arnewood school has been the result of changes in pupil numbers. The hon. Gentleman will know that last year, against the advice of the local authority, the projected numbers for Arnewood school were based on a wrong calculation. That must be put right this year.

The hon. Gentleman speaks with some passion about the needs of children in his constituency. I am sure that he will welcome the fact that all the pupils in his constituency area will benefit from the extra £25 million that the Government have allocated to the local authority—a 5.9 per cent. increase in funding compared to last year.

Mr. David Willetts (Havant): Will the Minister confirm that approximately two thirds of grant-maintained schools face such severe funding cuts that they have to receive transitional protection? Will she also confirm that her Department forecast that approximately only one third of grant-maintained schools would be in that severe position? This year, many grant-maintained schools are struggling on last year's cash budget; there is no extra money to meet inflation and for teachers' pay. Does the Minister not realise that the Government's attack on grant-maintained schools has created nothing short of a crisis in the funding of the GM sector? What is she going do to about it?

Ms Morris: The hon. Gentleman must realise that those GM schools that are receiving transitional protection are receiving more money than local authority schools in similar circumstances. I would not pretend for one minute that it is easy, in a relatively short time, to move from the funding system that we inherited from the Conservative Government—in which school funding was based not on need, but on category. We will have no truck with that system. We shall move to a system in which every child is valued, whether they go to a community school or a foundation school. We shall ensure that that transition is carried out as easily as possible for GM schools.

The hon. Gentleman has a bit of a cheek to huff and puff at the Dispatch Box, talking about the difficulty for schools as they move from one funding system to another. Under the previous Conservative Government, how many times did he tell the House about the difficulties suffered by 23,000 schools as pupil funding was cut by £40 per pupil during the last three years of that Government? What is true is that every school is benefiting from the increase in money, whether capital or revenue funding, that the Government have given. We are able to celebrate the fact that, throughout the education service, there is an extra £200 per pupil of Government funding this year and over the next two years.

National Curriculum

6. **Mrs. Eleanor Laing** (Epping Forest): If he will make a statement on reform of the national curriculum. [85398]

The Secretary of State for Education and Employment (Mr. David Blunkett): On 13 May, I launched the Qualifications and Curriculum Authority's proposed revisions to the national curriculum. That

consultation will conclude on 23 July, and orders and changes will be announced in the autumn. The intention behind the review is to contribute to the agenda on raising standards, to retain stability and consistency in the curriculum, to ensure a full and rounded entitlement to learning for all pupils and to encourage the development of best practice. Establishing the literacy and numeracy framework as a key part of the curriculum has been a priority in our mind, and we are pleased with the welcome that that has so far received.

Mrs. Laing: I thank the Secretary of State for that very full answer. I am sure that he agrees that, to get on with the important job that we expect them to do, teachers and head teachers want a degree of certainty, so that they can plan what they are going to teach in the months ahead, and less bureaucracy, so that they can spend their time teaching children, not filling in forms for the Department for Education and Employment. Therefore, is there not a contradiction in the Secretary of State's answer, in that he says that his top priority is retaining stability in schools, but that the review of the national curriculum will not be published until the autumn?

Why is the right hon. Gentleman not telling teachers and head teachers sooner what should be done in the next term and the next school year? Why do they have to wait such a long time and have to go through so much bureaucracy, instead of being able to concentrate on the basics? There is a difference between the rhetoric, which is very good, and the practice, which is not.

Mr. Blunkett: Let me pause to draw breath. I have a statutory duty to consult on the recommendations of the QCA, and I am using the minimum time available to ensure that that consultation concludes at the end of a summer term. It is not possible to issue the immediate response to that consultation to schools during August, because they are on holiday. When schools return in autumn, we shall get the results of the review to them as quickly as possible. Through the standards fund and the web, we shall provide information, schemes of work and updates so that everyone has the necessary information. We shall ensure that schools have the rest of the academic year to prepare for the main changes, which are minimal and which will be introduced from 2000. All reasonable people will recognise that is the fastest that we can act.

Mr. Tony McWalter (Hemel Hempstead): I welcome the introduction of thinking skills to the new national curriculum. Will my right hon. Friend confirm that he is willing to respond positively to the recent offer of help made to him by the National Committee for Philosophy in developing that curriculum in such a way that the committee's expertise is made available to the schools sector?

Mr. Blunkett: We strongly welcome advice and support and have made a point of ensuring that we open up access to the information and advice that is available outside the Department. I shall be happy to take on board the suggested contribution to which my hon. Friend refers.

Mr. Phil Willis (Harrogate and Knaresborough): The Liberal Democrats welcome the review of the national curriculum—although it is rather ironic that it was introduced without any consultation. We particularly welcome the fact that the Government have taken the Crick report seriously. As we shall see huge voter apathy in today's European elections, does the Secretary of State believe that citizenship should be not only taught, but practised? How does the Secretary of State propose to introduce citizenship into schools, and to ensure that school councils and active participation are the norm rather than the exception?

Mr. Blunkett: I strongly welcome the hon. Gentleman's comments. About a third of our secondary schools are conducting the recommended citizenship programmes, which will be implemented by 2002. The development of citizenship and democracy in our schools is an essential feature of a modern, civilised society. It will help students to understand the world around them and their part in it. However, even in my wildest dreams, I do not imagine that the introduction of citizenship and democracy into the curriculum will improve voter turnout in European elections.

Youth Service

7. **Ms Dari Taylor** (Stockton, South): If he will make a statement on his plans for the youth service. [85400]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Education and Employment (Mr. George Mudie): After analysing and considering the national audit of the youth service published last year, we are considering policies for the benefit of young people, including the role of the youth service. We will consult—in fact, we will issue a consultation document—on the future of the youth service, but context, content and timing will need to be determined once we have decided on the wider services for young people generally. I shall make an announcement in due course.

Ms Taylor: Does my hon. Friend agree that too many young people in the 13 to 19 age bracket feel excluded, and that far too many believe that they are criticised and blamed for the things that go wrong in our society? Those young people are definitely keen to be involved—although their participation is often not recognised. Will my hon. Friend consider how the voluntary sector agencies can participate in consultation about youth provision? The youth service—certainly in my constituency—is an able group, which could be involved, and participate at the appropriate level, with young people.

Mr. Mudie: My hon. Friend and the House will be aware that a main thrust of Government policy is ending social exclusion. I say time and again—whenever I have the opportunity—that the youth service plays an important role, and is a vital partner in allowing colleges, schools and universities to widen participation and end social exclusion. The voluntary sector can play a valuable role. For example, one of its great strengths is its willingness to provide new solutions and opportunities. We fund the voluntary youth sector through the scheme for national voluntary youth organisations, and the Secretary of State announced late last year fresh grants for 81 organisations and a 30 per cent. funding increase. We support the voluntary youth sector not only verbally, but financially.

Disabled People

8. **Mr. Tom Levitt** (High Peak): What steps his Department is taking to assist people with disabilities when they return to work. [85401]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Education and Employment (Ms Margaret Hodge): The Government are committed to providing high-quality services to help disabled people who want to return to work. They include access to work, the job introduction scheme, and advice and guidance from the disability service teams. Measures taken by my Department sit within a broader pattern of across-Government help, including the new disabled persons tax credit and initiatives within the health service.

Mr. Levitt: I am sure that my hon. Friend will have noted that the Welfare Reform and Pensions Bill provides improved linkage rules which give added confidence to disabled people who wish to return to work. Does she agree that equally important is the question of job retention for disabled people? If people suffer from a progressive disability—such as reduced hearing, sight, dexterity or mobility—the extra assistance provided to help them stay in work will not only increase their earning power, but retain skills within the work force and decrease the benefits bill in the long run. It is better for an individual's dignity if, despite a disability, he or she can be encouraged to stay in work rather than fall out of the work force.

Ms Hodge: I agree entirely with the sentiments expressed by my hon. Friend. We consider the retention of people in jobs to be such a high priority that we are working with colleagues in the Department of Health, the Department of Social Security and local government social services to find out what new measures we can take to ensure that there is better rehabilitation and retention of people who fall ill at work. [HON. MEMBERS: "Remploy."] On Remploy, I should hope that there would be cross-party support for our initiative to ensure that people are integrated into mainstream employment opportunities and given the dignity of working alongside others, rather than being segregated in factories as they have been for far too long. The previous Government should have tackled that issue many years ago.

Mr. Bill O'Brien (Normanton): Will my hon. Friend take note of a case in my constituency in which Barclays bank sacked a person who was suffering from chronic fatigue syndrome, or ME? When that person asked for extra time to recover, the request was denied. Is there something that we can do to impress on employers the fact that they have a responsibility to dedicated workers who develop disabilities, and who should be given assistance instead of being sacked and left with no hope of further employment? Can we do something to help those people?

Ms Hodge: I would be most grateful if my hon. Friend would write to me about the case to which he referred because it strikes me that, if there was discrimination against that employee, there might well be a case against the employer under the Disability Discrimination Act 1995.

The Department has now received the first stage of research on the early cases taken under the Disability Discrimination Act. That demonstrates that more cases have been taken under that Act in its early days than were taken under the equal opportunities and race relations legislation. It demonstrates also the beginnings of the Act's good impact; for example, a person with a visual impairment received an award of more than £100,000. We hope that, when our Disability Rights Commission is up and running, there will be further support to individuals to ensure that they have rights at work.

Non-maintained Schools

9. **Mr. Nick St. Aubyn** (Guildford): If he will make a statement on the regulations to govern the purchase of provision by local education authorities from non-maintained schools. [85406]

The Minister for School Standards (Ms Estelle Morris): The legislation that the Government introduced last year enables the Secretary of State to prevent the introduction of a new locally funded assisted places scheme. We shall publish draft regulations in due course.

Mr. St. Aubyn: During the proceedings on the School Standards and Framework Act 1998, the Minister's predecessor told the Standing Committee:

"We shall begin the consultation after Report and Third Reading, when the House has expressed a view on new clause 12. That is part of the conventions of Parliament, and that is how we shall conduct our business."—[*Official Report, Standing Committee A*, 3 March 1998; c. 786.]

The Minister did not conduct his business in that manner. In February, my hon. Friend the Member for Maidenhead (Mrs. May) tabled a written question to the present Minister, asking when draft regulations would be published for consultation. She replied:

"It is planned to issue draft regulations for consultation in May 1999."—[*Official Report*, 22 February 1999; Vol. 326, c. *20*.]

We now hear from the Minister that she refuses to give any date for those regulations.

When individual schools and education action zones have the power, without regulations, to buy places at independent schools, why are such regulations needed? Conservative-run Surrey local education authority, which has already shown the Government a lead by bringing in the private sector to manage a maintained school, is ready and willing to show the Government a lead in building new bridges with the independent sector. Give us the tools and we shall do the work.

Ms Morris: The hon. Gentleman is getting very exercised on this issue. My predecessor said that we would publish regulations after Report and Third Reading, and we shall do so. It is a matter of prioritising.

As far as we know, no local authority has plans to reproduce the assisted places scheme at a local level. The hon. Gentleman will know that we have introduced many regulations since the passage of the school standards legislation. The Under-Secretary, my hon. Friend the Member for Norwich, South (Mr. Clarke), and I feel, as I am sure that the hon. Gentleman's Front-Bench colleagues do, that we spend much of our time in Committee discussing statutory instruments. We have

discussed and laid statutory instruments on admissions, parental appeal, funding and the new standards framework. It was a greater priority for us to implement for the start of the next school term the new framework and the new funding, admission and appeal arrangements. We shall come to further secondary legislation in due time, as I said.

Mr. David Willetts (Havant): On the Secretary of State's comments about citizenship and the European elections, may I invite the Minister to congratulate our education Whip, the hon. Member for Beckenham (Mrs. Lait), on already having done three hours' telling in the European elections? Ministers are worried about turnout; it helps if one fights an election campaign. We find such telling quite a good way of increasing turnout.

On the question of my hon. Friend the Member for Guildford (Mr. St. Aubyn), there is a serious problem. Guildford had to follow cumbersome rules, which were set by the European Union procurement policy in the absence of any regulations guiding procedures in the area. How come Islington can do a quick deal with one company for the private management of some education service virtually overnight, but education authorities that want responsibly to consider purchasing private management of schools must undergo time-consuming procedures? That is why the regulations are needed. LEAs have been kept waiting for far too long.

Ms Morris: I wonder which group of Conservatives the Whip was counting—those who are pro-European or those who are anti-European—and at which school she was doing so.

More seriously, the point raised by the hon. Member for Guildford (Mr. St. Aubyn) relates to our fear that assisted places schemes would be reproduced locally. We do not want that; we have made that clear. We want the private sector to be involved properly in the education service, where that is appropriate. We shall ensure that ways of enabling that to happen are implemented.

The hon. Member for Havant (Mr. Willetts) should realise that much of what we heard from his Government about the relationship with the private sector did not transpire. Over the past two years since we have taken power, we have been very carefully building up contacts and establishing rules and regulations to enable a relationship with the private sector, in order that it may contribute to the wider agenda of raising standards. That has happened in both Guildford and Islington. We shall reflect on those processes and, if need be, simplify them. We have no intention of allowing local authorities to reproduce assisted places schemes locally.

Reading

10. **Ms Gisela Stuart** (Birmingham, Edgbaston): What steps have been taken by his Department to encourage parents to read to their young children. [85409]

The Minister for School Standards (Ms Estelle Morris): Encouraging parents to read to their young children has been a very important part of both the literacy strategy and the national year for reading. We have run a series of television and radio advertisements for a free leaflet entitled "A Little Reading Goes A Long Way". The leaflet offers parents practical advice about how to read with their children. More than 1 million copies have been requested so far, and a further 2 million have been distributed through various outlets, including supermarkets and doctors' waiting rooms.

Ms Stuart: I thank the Minister for that answer. Reading to young children is beneficial not only to the child-parent relationship but to educational development. Is the Minister aware of the project that was first piloted in Birmingham in 1992, in which parents were given a leaflet and book alerting them to access to libraries when their babies attended hearing tests? In 1997, that scheme was run again for the whole city and, in the past two years, 25,000 children have received as part of the core-school partnership a pack of a book and information on the library. I gather that the scheme is being rolled out nationally. How much support will the Department give to the book start project?

Ms Morris: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. In the city of Birmingham, in which both our constituencies lie, an incredibly positive scheme, which was originally called "Books for Babies", was launched. The issue is about changing the culture and giving parents the confidence to realise that libraries are for them, and that they can learn from libraries and help their children. We are indeed rolling out the programme nationwide, with funding from the national year of reading and, I am very pleased to say, from private sector sponsorship. My hon. Friend will know that, when key stage 1 children in Birmingham and a control group were tested, the improvement in attainment rates among those who had been part of "Books for Babies" was quite remarkable. I therefore look forward to many more young children and their parents benefiting from the rolled-out scheme, and to rising reading and numeracy levels among children aged six and seven.

Secondary School Closures

11. **Mr. Nicholas Winterton** (Macclesfield): If he will make a statement on his responsibilities in relation to proposals for the closure of secondary schools. [85410]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Education and Employment (Mr. Charles Clarke): Madam Speaker—[Hon. Members: "Hear, hear."] Thank you to the fan club.

Proposals for the closure of schools are usually brought forward by the local education authority and are copied to the Secretary of State. If there are no statutory objections and the proposals are not called in for decision by the Secretary of State, the decision may be made by the local education authority. If proposals fall to the Secretary of State for decision, they will be decided on their individual merits, taking into account the advice of Her Majesty's inspectors and any points made by interested parties in the local area.

Mr. Winterton: I am grateful to the Minister for his detailed and helpful reply. Although I am totally in favour of excellence and success, I also support the idea of a number of schools being designated to take those with learning difficulties. League tables, unless responsibly used, can mean that a school will suffer as a result of the

fact that it takes youngsters with learning difficulties, and many parents may opt to send their children to other schools.

Will the Minister, the rest of the Government and the bodies that are to take responsibility for making decisions on the closure of schools take into account the fact that some schools take on the burden, and the important task, of dealing with children with learning difficulties? Should that fact not be borne in mind before a hasty decision is taken to close a school because of a reduction in numbers?

Mr. Clarke: The short answer is yes. The hon. Gentleman has made his point powerfully and correctly. In several of the individual cases that I have had to consider during my time in office, the issues that he has raised have been taken into account, because of the considerations that he has mentioned. The general issue that he raises is the difficult one of the relationship between league tables and people with special educational needs. We are thinking carefully about how to ensure that crude league tables are considered only as part of a fully rounded view that takes into account all the issues that schools must address in trying to meet the needs of pupils in their areas. I welcome the hon. Gentleman's interest, and commit myself to respond positively to his approach.

School Playing Fields

12. **Mr. Nigel Beard** (Bexleyheath and Crayford): What plans he has to restrict the sale of school playing fields. [85412]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Education and Employment (Mr. Charles Clarke): We have already delivered on our manifesto pledge to protect school playing fields. Since 1 October 1998, section 77 of the School Standards and Framework Act 1998 has meant that local authorities in England may not dispose, or change the use, of school playing fields without the prior consent of my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Education and Employment. On 7 June, earlier this week, we published the criteria against which decisions on applications from local authorities and governing bodies will normally be made.

The first criterion is financial; any proceeds from sales must be returned to education or used to enhance sports provision. The second relates to schools' needs; the playing fields and other sports facilities that will be left must meet the needs of local schools, particularly primary schools. Thirdly, there are community needs; the playing fields and other sports facilities that will be left must meet the needs of the local community. The fourth criterion involves consultation; there must have been adequate consultation both locally and with recognised national bodies such as Learning through Landscapes, the Central Council of Physical Recreation or the National Playing Fields Association, so that their views can be taken into account. Those proposals offer a clear way forward in improving playing field provision in schools.

Mr. Beard: I thank the Minister for that answer. It was one of the scandals of the public asset stripping under the previous Government that 5,000 school playing fields were sold off. Does the Minister share the concern recently expressed by the National Association of Head Teachers about the level of fitness of many of their pupils, and their sedentary life styles? Will he give an assurance that school playing fields and sporting facilities will be used to ensure that standards of, and improvements in, fitness keep pace with classroom achievement?

Mr. Clarke: I agree with the points and sentiments expressed by my hon. Friend. We have a series of initiatives to develop a much healthier approach to life in school, ranging across changes in the national curriculum, our playing fields initiative, and our approach to diet and food. We have a joint healthy schools initiative, which I and my right hon. Friend the Minister for Public Health chair, to bring together and to develop activity in this area. We go down the line that has been set out by my hon. Friend. It is critical that we develop more resources for school playing fields and sporting activity, and better use of those facilities. Yesterday, I met representatives of the Central Council of Physical Recreation to discuss ways in which we might develop that approach.

Ms Harriet Harman (Camberwell and Peckham): Does my hon. Friend recognise that there are major new opportunities for sport and for music, art and drama in the Government's new nationwide network of after-school clubs? What can my hon. Friend's Department do to ensure that these clubs take good care of, and look after, the children involved, and extend to them opportunities for sport, music, art and drama, which are often not available to them during their time in school?

Mr. Clarke: I strongly agree with my right hon. Friend, who puts the case with her traditional power and force. We are making resources available through the new opportunities fund, with £125 million being allocated for schools, councils, community groups and other organisations to improve access and develop the activities to which my right hon. Friend referred. We are encouraging out-of-school activity in music, arts and drama in the way that she suggests. We believe that that is an essential approach. Critical to it is developing a much better relationship between schools and their local communities and community organisations, so that real co-operation can be built up. We give this initiative major priority, and it is important that we continue to drive it forward.

Educational Attainment (Inner London)

13. **Mr. Andrew Robathan** (Blaby): If he will make a statement on the current level of educational attainment in schools in the inner-London boroughs. [85415]

The Minister for School Standards (Ms Estelle Morris): In 1998, the attainment of pupils in schools in the inner-London boroughs was below the national average in literacy, numeracy and science at the ages of seven, 11 and 13, and in the achievement of five or more higher grade GCSEs. However, between 1997 and 1998, the improvement in literacy and numeracy tests was twice the national average, and the improvement in higher grade GCSEs was more than three times the national average.

All our policies to raise standards are contributing to urgent and essential improvement in inner-city education. That has been most recently drawn together in the excellence in cities programme announced in March this year.

Mr. Robathan: All of us who live in central or inner London, even if only for part of the week, must be

concerned about education standards in those areas. Does the Minister accept—I know that she did not mention this—that the dreadful performance of the education service in Hackney and Islington is partly due to the ridiculous education philosophy put into practice by Labour education authorities in those two boroughs? Does she further accept that it is perhaps not appropriate that someone who was responsible for the dreadful education performance in Islington—the hon. Member for Barking (Ms Hodge)—should now be the Under-Secretary of State for Education and Employment? Will the Minister give her candid opinion of those who denied selection to other parents, but were prepared to send their children across London to get away from dreadful education services to schools such as the London Oratory in west London?

Ms Morris: I am not sure that the best way in which to tackle vast under-achievement in inner London, and some other urban areas, is to lay blame on actions taken many years ago and on those who were in post more than a decade ago. It is necessary now to accept that things must change and that action must be taken. The hon. Gentleman will know that, in Hackney and Islington, there has not been a failure to support schools in the past two years. However, there was a failure to support schools over a long period. The Conservative Government did nothing to put matters right.

Over the past two years, the Government have speeded-up Ofsted inspections of local authorities. We have made it clear that we will take action without fear or favour where there is under-achievement. We shall retrain teachers to teach better literacy and numeracy. We shall put more money into our schools, we shall have high expectations of them and we shall prioritise them in terms of £350 million in excellence in city initiatives. If the Conservative Government had done only one tenth of those things over the previous 18 years, I probably would not have to tell the House that there is chronic under-achievement in some of the inner-London boroughs.

National Grid for Learning

14. **Mr. John Bercow** (Buckingham): If he will make a statement on the benefits to schools of the national grid for learning. [85416]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Education and Employment (Mr. Charles Clarke): The use of information and communications technology in the classroom can bring learning gains, increased motivation and improved attitudes to learning. The national grid for learning is a nationwide programme to bring those benefits to all our learners, by providing access to the national focal point for education on the internet, stimulating the development of high-quality educational resources, and organising them in such a way as to make them useful and easily accessible to teachers and students.

Mr. Bercow: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for that reply, which rightly emphasises the potential benefits of the national grid for learning. However, given that only 12 per cent. of primary schools have access to the internet, owing substantially to the prohibitive cost of line rental, and given also that Gawcott county first school in my constituency has to pay the same £1,200 per year as a large comprehensive, will the hon. Gentleman undertake to go back to the drawing board and consider by what means arrangements can be improved so as to reflect the different needs and ability to pay of the primary and secondary sectors?

Mr. Clarke: I will commit myself and the Government to intensification of our massive commitment to get ICT into schools—a commitment that was introduced by this Government in an area that was flagrantly neglected by our predecessors. Substantial sums are going into the programme, together with substantial training for teachers, physical kit, internet connections and software development. The hon. Gentleman is right to say that there are different demands in different parts of the system, as between primary and secondary schools, which we are actively addressing in our strategy to roll out the ICT programme.

I can commit myself to taking into account that specific point when we consider the connections that need to be made. However, the core point is that there must be a major national initiative to drive forward and use the advantages. I believe that we are part of that initiative, and I regret only that it has taken the election of this Government to start to move it forward.

Mr. Don Foster (Bath): Does the Minister agree that, if we are to get our pupils on-line, we must also get our teachers on-line? Can he therefore explain why, despite all the hype from the Government, the Chancellor and his Department are making available sufficient money for only 6.5 per cent. of teachers to have a lap-top computer?

Mr. Clarke: I entirely agree with the hon. Gentleman about the need to focus on teachers. None of the potential benefits can be liberated unless teachers possess the means to implement the change. The hon. Gentleman is right to identify the benefits of the lap-top for teachers scheme. Where we have introduced it, it has brought real benefits; we are looking to extend it in various ways. He will be aware that the key issue is to ensure that in every school and on the internet and the national grid, there are resources that can be used by teachers beneficially. That is what we are focusing on, and what I believe we are delivering.

Business of the House

12.33 pm

Sir George Young (North-West Hampshire): May I ask the Leader of the House to give us the business for next week?

The President of the Council and Leader of the House of Commons (Mrs. Margaret Beckett): The business for next week will be as follows:

MONDAY 14 JUNE—Remaining stages of the Health Bill *[Lords]*.

TUESDAY 15 JUNE—Progress on remaining stages of the Immigration and Asylum Bill.

WEDNESDAY 16 JUNE—Until 2 o'clock, there will be debates on the motion for the Adjournment of the House.

Conclusion of remaining stages of the Immigration and Asylum Bill.

THURSDAY 17 JUNE—Debate on Kosovo on a motion for the Adjournment of the House.

FRIDAY 18 JUNE—Debate on tourism on a motion for the Adjournment of the House.

The provisional business for the following week—I emphasise to the House that it is more than usually provisional, because of all the obvious reasons related to Kosovo—will be as follows:

MONDAY 21 JUNE—Remaining stages of the Access to Justice Bill *[Lords]*.

Motion on the Appropriation (No. 2) (Northern Ireland) Order.

TUESDAY 22 JUNE—Second Reading of the Food Standards Bill.

Motion on the Church of England Cathedrals Measure.

Motion on Care of Places of Worship Measure.

WEDNESDAY 23 JUNE—Until 2 o'clock, there will be debates on the motion for the Adjournment of the House.

Opposition Day [14th Allotted Day] (First Part). There will be a debate on an Opposition motion. Subject to be announced.

Consideration of any Lords amendments that may be received to the Tax Credits Bill.

THURSDAY 24 JUNE—Opposition Day [15th Allotted Day].

There will be a debate on an Opposition motion. Subject to be announced.

FRIDAY 25 JUNE—There will be a debate on innovation and enterprise on a motion for the Adjournment of the House.

The House will also wish to know that on Wednesday 16 June there will be a debate on incineration of waste in European Standing Committee A.

[Wednesday 16 June 1999:

European Standing Committee A—Relevant European Union documents: 12756/97, 12791/98, Incineration of Waste. Relevant European Legislation Committee Reports: HC 155-xiii and HC 155-xxxi(1997–98). Relevant European Scrutiny Committee Reports: HC 34-viii and HC 34-xxi(1998-99).]

Sir George Young: The House is grateful for next week's business and an indication of the business for the following week. We welcome next week's debate on Kosovo. Will it be opened by the Prime Minister?

Will the right hon. Lady find time soon for a debate on the report of the royal commission on long-term care, published some three months ago? There is concern, expressed in early-day motion 405, that the important issues that it raises should not be ignored.

[*That this House congratulates the Government for its commitment to tackling the inequalities and inefficiencies of the present system of funding long-term care for older people; commends the Royal Commission on Long-Term Care for reporting within 14 months after consultation with over 2,000 organisations and experts in the field as well as members of the public; and joins with Age Concern in calling on the Government to produce a clear timetable for introducing long overdue changes to the system in recognition of the fact that older people do not have the time to wait for further debate.*]

Likewise, there is a need for a debate on drugs following the first report of Keith Hellawell. Might those two subjects be debated shortly?

Given the real concern that those who served this country in Northern Ireland 30 years ago in the Parachute Regiment might be put needlessly at risk, may we have an opportunity to debate soon the issue of their anonymity in the Bloody Sunday inquiry?

As Britain experiences today its first taste of the closed list and proportional representation, would it not be sensible to have an early debate so that hon. Members can share with the Government their constituents' experience of the voting system and the new method of representation?

Finally, in the interests of all those who work in the House, can the right hon. Lady shed some light on the summer recess? If she cannot tell us the date, can she gives us the week, or, failing that, the month, in which it might commence?

Mrs. Beckett: I cannot tell the right hon. Gentleman who will open the debate on Kosovo, but I doubt that it will be the Prime Minister. However, that is still under discussion because of ministerial commitments.

The right hon. Gentleman requested debates on long-term care and on drugs, and I shall bear that in mind. I am conscious that interest in debating those matters has been expressed. Obviously, the report on long-term care was detailed and the Government are giving a great deal of careful thought to its conclusions. As he will appreciate, and as he knows that I have said before, we have lost a lot of time as a result of the Kosovo issue, although I do not think any hon. Member regrets that. It was necessary to find time for proper reporting to the House, but it has made a difference to our finding time for other issues.

With regard to the inquiry in Northern Ireland, I understand that the issue of anonymity, which I accept is important, is today being considered by the courts, so not only do I not want to comment further, but, depending on what the courts say, I doubt whether it is a matter on which we could have a debate. Moreover, those are very much matters for the inquiry; it is for the inquiry to make those decisions.

I cannot undertake to find time for a debate on our constituents' experience of the European elections, although I rather doubt that, faced with a ballot paper on which they were invited to make a free choice on such a vast number of names, they would be as grateful as

Conservative Members seem to think that they would be. No doubt, we shall have a great deal of anecdotal comment, but whether we need a debate is another matter.

As for the recess, I appreciate the right hon. Gentleman's generosity in the breadth of the indication that he invited me to give. I can certainly tell him that we hope that we might rise in August.

Mr. Andrew Mackinlay (Thurrock): On this day, will my right hon. Friend reflect on the fact that some United Kingdom subjects will not be able to exercise their vote in the European elections and, unlike the majority, would really like to do so? I refer to the people of Gibraltar. Because of the widespread cross-party interest and support in the House for Gibraltar, and bearing in mind that my hon. Friends on the Select Committee on Foreign Affairs are bringing forward a report in about a week's time, may we have some dedicated time on the Floor of this Chamber, not the new one, to discuss Gibraltar? That is something that we owe those people who are denied the franchise today—something that I regret.

Mrs. Beckett: I know that my hon. Friend takes great interest in those matters and is an enthusiastic advocate for the people of Gibraltar, but I fear that I cannot undertake to find time in the near future for a debate dedicated to their affairs. I am sorry that he rejects the notion of having a debate elsewhere.

Mr. Mackinlay: In addition.

Mrs. Beckett: Yes, but I would simply say to my hon. Friend that there are many worthy matters and we are unlikely ever to find time to debate them on the Floor of the Chamber, which is one reason why the majority of Members of the House decided to provide extra time in another way.

Mr. Phil Willis (Harrogate and Knaresborough): The Leader of the House may be aware that two of my constituents, Mr. and Mrs. Adams, were last week on holiday in St. Petes Beach, Florida. They were arrested—

Madam Speaker: Order. I understood that, in asking about business, the hon. Gentleman was speaking on behalf of his party, not on behalf of his constituents.

Mr. Willis: With respect, Madam Speaker, I am raising an issue that affects all citizens of this country who visit Florida.

Madam Speaker: Perhaps we can move to that issue. I called the hon. Gentleman at this stage because I had been given his name as the Member speaking on behalf of his party.

Mr. Willis: The party has asked me to raise this issue, and I say to the Leader of the House that my constituents were arrested, strip searched and put in jail on a charge relating to child abuse, although all that they did was leave their hotel room and go to the side of the pool to watch a firework display. Will she please ask the Foreign Secretary to issue guidance to all families who are about to travel to Florida on holiday, to make sure that they are not subjected to the level of abuse to which my constituents were subjected by the authorities in Florida?

Mrs. Beckett: I am afraid that I cannot undertake to find time for a debate specifically on that matter in the near future, although I understand the hon. Gentleman's concern, both for his constituents and about the impact that the problems that they faced would have if they were to be faced by many others. However, there is a debate on tourism on Friday next week and, although it may have been intended to focus on tourism within the United Kingdom, an opportunity might arise to work the matter into the discussion.

Mr. Gordon Prentice (Pendle): My right hon. Friend will have read the horrifying case reported in the press on Tuesday this week of the 17-month-old girl who was found to have a 1.5 in hypodermic syringe lodged within her kidney; it had been there for nine months. I have made some inquiries, and that incident is in no way unusual: eight people died last year because surgical detritus was left in a wound following an operation and 749 people suffered in the same way without dying. Such incidents are not unusual and this matter is important enough for my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Health to come to the House next week to make a statement saying what advice and guidance is given to surgeons to make sure that negligence in operating theatres does not lead to such horrifying consequences.

Mrs. Beckett: I sympathise with those involved in that difficult case, and so will my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State. The Government have put extra investment into the health service and we intend to use it to raise standards. All I can say to my hon. Friend is that I do not think that I can find time for a debate on the matter, and I am not sure that my right hon. Friend will be able to make a statement on it in the near future. However, we are dealing with the remaining stages of the Health Bill on Monday and it is possible that an issue arising in the debate might allow this matter to be discussed.

Mr. Peter Brooke (Cities of London and Westminster): Before the Leader of the House made her statement today, I received earlier this week letters from UNICEF and Amnesty International telling me that the remaining stages of the Immigration and Asylum Bill would be dealt with next week. Would I be asking too much if I requested that the House be told of such matters before outside organisations, however worthy they may be?

Mrs. Beckett: I understand, and sympathise with, the right hon. Gentleman's view. My understanding is that that is what those organisations expected and that the letter said "probably", although I do not recall receiving a copy myself. He will know that there has been some discussion about the Immigration and Asylum Bill coming before the House at an earlier stage and that further work was needed. I think that those organisations had anticipated that, although the Bill had not reached the House quite as early as had perhaps originally been thought, it would be considered in the near future. I

[Mrs. Beckett]

understand and take his point that it is right for the House to know about such matters first, and we try to observe that convention.

Mr. David Winnick (Walsall, North): Has my right hon. Friend been told whether the Tory Opposition are still calling for an inquiry into the start of the war? I have not heard a word about that over the past few days, and certainly not since last night.

By the time of next week's Kosovo debate, will we have been told whether those in the discredited gang of appeasers outside—people like the Pilgers and the Pinters—have written to apologise for getting it completely wrong?

Mrs. Beckett: I am fairly certain that, if any comment is made that is thought worthy of being reported to the House, it will be reported in the debate to which my hon. Friend refers. As for whether the Opposition are still calling for an inquiry into the start of the war, I can only say that I, like my hon. Friend, have heard no more about that lately. No doubt, whether the call is renewed will depend on how things go.

Sir Teddy Taylor (Rochford and Southend, East): Should we not, as a matter of urgency, have a debate next week on the percentage of people who voted in today's European elections? If, as seems possible, three quarters of Britain's voters go on strike today, have we not an obligation to review the democratic outrage whereby people are being asked to vote for a party, and to leave it to the party bosses to decide who is elected to the Parliament? If there is a massive strike today, have we not a duty to debate the issue next week?

Mrs. Beckett: If there is a relatively low turnout in the European elections, I doubt—unfortunately—that anyone will be dreadfully surprised. I think that all hon. Members regret the turnouts that we have seen even for general elections—and especially for local and European elections—which I, certainly, would like to be higher than they have been in recent years. Down the years, there has historically not been as high a turnout as most of us would wish.

I am always interested when Opposition Members refer to the notion that party bosses rather than the electorate will have the say on who are the candidates, as if they themselves were chosen by the electorate to be candidates for their parties and their constituencies. As far as I am aware, none of them was.

Mr. Paul Flynn (Newport, West): Is it not time that we had a debate on the Government's 10-year strategy on drugs? In 10 years' time, the drugs tsar will have resigned, the Prime Minister is likely to be Lord Sedgefield—

Mr. Mackinlay: Viscount Sedgefield.

Mr. Flynn: By that time, we shall have seen at least 1,000 avoidable deaths, and, if we follow the current trend and go on repeating our failures, the situation will continue.

There has been a change in the public perception of the debate. Even the *Daily Mail*, which is the voice of the middle-aged and the middle class, has described the Government's policy as mere window dressing. It has talked of the hypocrisy of that policy as perceived by the public, and has called for a debate on the legalisation of drugs in order to reduce the harm done by them. Why on earth are we stupidly continuing to repeat the tired, failed policies that have killed thousands of our young people, rather than imitating the success of countries that have reduced the amount of drug harm?

Mrs. Beckett: I know that my hon. Friend feels strongly about the issue, and takes every opportunity to advocate his point of view. As I told the right hon. Member for North-West Hampshire (Sir G. Young), we are conscious of the need to find time to debate the drugs strategy. I hope that we shall be able to debate it at some point, and that my hon. Friend can make his case again.

I am not sure whether my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister has any wish or aspiration to become Lord Sedgefield, or indeed Viscount Sedgefield. I can only say that, as a loyal member of the Cabinet, I feel confident that I ought to suggest that he should at least be a duke.

Mr. Gerald Howarth (Aldershot): I accept that, quite properly, the Leader of the House is reticent about commenting on matters that are before the court today. However, the question of anonymity for former soldiers in the Parachute Regiment is of great concern throughout the country, not just in Aldershot.

The Prime Minister has said that he can do nothing, although he was responsible for setting up the inquiry. May I suggest a solution? If the soldiers are not to be granted anonymity because the court cannot do that, could not the Leader of the House present a one-line Bill to give the security of the law to former soldiers who have served the country so well and put their lives at risk?

Mrs. Beckett: I understand the concern that the hon. Gentleman expresses. I understand, too, that he expresses it very much on behalf of his constituents, which is very much what all hon. Members are here to do. I accept that the concern goes wider than his constituency, but I know that, in his constituency, there will be particular worry. I can say only that, while I understand that concern, it is a matter for the inquiry; it is not a matter in which the Government can intervene. From his question, I am not entirely sure whether he is aware—he invited me to bring in legislation—that events have moved on to some degree and that the courts are looking into that matter at this moment.

Mr. John Healey (Wentworth): Will my right hon. Friend find time for an early debate on the impact of the national minimum wage, a measure to which she gave a strong helping hand? Such a debate would allow the House to examine the emerging evidence that more than 400,000 jobs have been created since the national minimum wage was announced last year, including more than 100,000 in typically low-paid sectors. Such a debate would also allow the House to expose the baseless fears that the Conservative party tried to raise on the impact on jobs of the minimum wage, which is proving to be a boost to jobs, not a threat.

Mrs. Beckett: My hon. Friend is entirely right. The Conservative party did allege that—I think that the final

figure was that about 2 million or 3 million jobs would be lost if any national minimum wage of any kind at any level were introduced. That was always nonsense.

My hon. Friend is right to say that, alongside the introduction of the national minimum wage, we have seen an increase in the number of jobs and in levels of employment. Although I would not say that we have evidence to link those two, as we pointed out before the election, it is true that, in, for example, parts of the United States and elsewhere, there has been evidence of the existence—and also of an increase in the level—of the national minimum wage and increases in employment at the same time, which again shows how ridiculous Conservative Members' claims were. However, I fear that I cannot undertake to find time for a special debate on the follies of the Opposition in the near future.

Mrs. Ann Winterton (Congleton): I follow the question that was raised earlier by the hon. Member for Newport, West (Mr. Flynn), who has left his place, but do not follow in his footsteps. What progress has the Leader of the House made in securing a debate in Government time on the national drugs strategy, so that hon. Members on both sides of the House and of the argument can have plenty of time to debate the matter? She will, I know, acknowledge that there has not yet been a debate in Government time in the current Parliament, and that the time given at the time of the statement was inadequate for the breadth of the subject.

Mrs. Beckett: However assiduous the Government are in having statements in the House, it does not allow for the full exploration of a subject in the way that debating time does. All I can say is that I will certainly bear the hon. Lady's remarks in mind.

Mr. Tam Dalyell (Linlithgow): Pursuant to the question from my hon. Friend the Member for Walsall, North (Mr. Winnick) on appeasers, I say frankly that I shared platforms with John Pilger and Harold Pinter and the apology for which my hon. Friend asks may be forthcoming, but it will be in five years, when the position might be altogether clearer.

In welcoming Thursday's debate, may I say that there are some of us on the Labour Benches—I do not know how many—who would welcome it being opened by the Prime Minister. As my right hon. Friend will remember, when she was the hon. Member for Lincoln, Harold Wilson often intervened in major foreign affairs debates; during the time of Vietnam, he certainly did so.

It is not a matter just of the amour propre or the self-importance of the House of Commons because, had there been a proper parliamentary debate before the bombs were dropped, much more would have been said by some of us about the need to act in concert with the Russians—if the Russians had not been sidelined for a whole fortnight, much agony might have been saved—we would certainly have asked questions about the refusal to use ground troops at an early stage, and we would never have allowed unchallenged the decision to start bombing and to refuse to use ground troops, leaving vulnerable the very people whom we were hoping to help.

Mrs. Beckett: I am well aware that in the past—certainly in the days of our late friend Lord Wilson—Prime Ministers used to take part in a greater variety of debates, as my hon. Friend rightly says. He will recall, as I do, that that tradition was sharply changed by Lady Thatcher. I am sure that I am right in saying that that policy was not much altered, if at all, by her successor and that my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister comes to the House more often than his predecessors. [HON. MEMBERS: "No."] It is true, I am afraid, and the statistics clearly bear it out.

I will certainly undertake both to my hon. Friend and to Opposition Members who have raised the matter to draw to the Prime Minister's attention the request that he should open the debate, but hon. Members will be aware that the pressures on him have been extremely heavy of late. It is not clear to me what my right hon. Friend's commitments might be, or whether that would be practical. We keep talking about the Cologne summit as though it were around the corner, but it is not—it has not yet taken place. I have a horrid feeling that that debate might be on the eve of the summit and that it simply may not be possible for the Prime Minister to be here. However, I undertake to draw the request to his attention.

I also take my hon. Friend's point that it is too early to know how events will turn out in the Balkans, although all of us obviously hope that they will improve, and we have taken some strong steps in that direction.

The Prime Minister has made five of the statements on that matter to the House. As to whether, if we had had a debate opened by the Prime Minister at an early stage, events might have gone differently, I fear that I cannot share my hon. Friend's view. As the Prime Minister has repeatedly said in the House, there have been intensive discussions with the Yugoslav authorities for a long time. Most of us would contest any suggestion that the Russians were sidelined. They have been very much a part of the discussions throughout, including right back at the beginning. I understand my hon. Friend's view and can assure him that opportunities will continue to be provided for those matters to be aired.

Mr. Christopher Chope (Christchurch): When will the electronic commerce Bill be published? It was announced with a fanfare of trumpets in the Queen's Speech, but it appears to be part of a policy that is in a certain amount of disarray. Have the Government abandoned any idea of producing such a Bill? Also, will the right hon. Lady tell us what has happened to the appointment of a so-called digital envoy? Two names were passed to No. 10 in March and we still await an announcement on whether such an envoy is to be appointed. There are rumours that the right hon. Member for Hartlepool (Mr. Mandelson) will be appointed instead. Will the right hon. Lady deal with that matter, too?

Mrs. Beckett: I am afraid that I cannot give the hon. Gentleman a date when the Bill is likely to be published, but I hope that it will be in the near future. Nor, indeed, can I give him information about the appointment of a digital envoy, although I will certainly draw his request for information to the attention of my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry.

[Mrs. Beckett]

Moreover, Trade and Industry questions are next week, so the hon. Gentleman may be able to ask my right hon. Friend directly.

Mr. Tony Colman (Putney): Next Wednesday, Thursday and Friday a major United Nations conference is taking place at the Queen Elizabeth II Conference Centre across the road. I understand that the Deputy Prime Minister will address it, along with a number of his ministerial colleagues. The conference is organised by the World Health Organisation and is on health and the environment. A number of issues are to be considered, including a legally binding protocol on water and health, and a charter on transport, environment and health. In view of the importance of that conference, will my right hon. Friend reconsider the business for next week, or arrange for us to have a debate before the end of the month on the outcome of the conference?

Mrs. Beckett: I certainly cannot undertake today to do that, although I shall bear in mind my hon. Friend's remarks. I accept that it is an important conference and I am sure that my right hon. Friend the Deputy Prime Minister will make an important contribution to it. I fear, however, that the request for a debate in this House will have to take its place on the list of eminently worthy subjects that we should debate.

Mr. Nicholas Winterton (Macclesfield): I join my right hon. Friend the shadow Leader of the House in asking for a debate at the earliest possible date on long-term care. The matter is of great importance to a growing number of people.

My real question is whether the Leader of the House is prepared to arrange for a debate in Government time on the procedural changes needed in this House as a result of devolution and the other changes that the Government have introduced to the way in which this country is governed. The right hon. Lady will know that I chair the Procedure Committee and that we recently published a report on the procedural consequences of devolution. If the House is to be fair to all parts of the United Kingdom, it is important that changes take place here to reflect the changes that the Government have brought about.

Mrs. Beckett: I have taken on board the request for a debate on long-term care. May I gently remind the hon. Gentleman and other Opposition Members that it was this Government who set up the royal commission? Although he is right to say that this is a problem of great importance, it has been around for nearly 20 years—for most of which time his party was in power. I am sure that he regrets as much as I do the fact that more was not done about long-term care at that time.

On the possibility of a debate in this House on the procedural consequences of devolution, I am aware of the important and serious work being done by the Committee chaired by the hon. Gentleman and I understand his wish to have those issues aired here in the near future. Such is the pressure on time that I cannot readily see my way to finding time for an early debate—and in due course we shall have a little more experience under our belt of how these changes are developing. I have taken on board his request, although I cannot grant it now.

Mr. Tom Levitt (High Peak): Will my right hon. Friend find time at an early stage for a debate on the subject of lip reading, given the high degree of cross-party support for my early-day motion 573?

[*That this House recognises that more than eight million people are hard of hearing or severely deaf; notes that most of them rely on spoken English for communication with family or friends and for equal access to leisure and social activities, public services, employment and education; further notes that the acquisition of lipreading skills is vital to this end and that this is best facilitated through lipreading classes taught by qualified tutors; believes that such a programme will encourage people with acquired hearing loss to maximise their opportunities to remain active and participating members of society; and calls on the Secretary of State for Education and Employment to require the new local learning partnerships to recognise their role in providing lipreading classes, at no charge to hearing-impaired users, in each locality.*]

The provision of lip reading classes across the country is patchy. Provision exists and access is easy in some parts but not in others, and courses are charged for in some parts but not in others. Because lip reading is so important to the older generation as they lose their hearing, it is vital that we have consistent provision and easy access to lip reading classes across the country. Will my right hon. Friend draw this matter to the attention of her right hon. Friends and arrange for an early debate on it?

Mrs. Beckett: I recognise my hon. Friend's great interest in the matter and the importance of lip reading to many people who suffer from hearing deficiencies. It is the Government's wish and intention that those who have responsibility for providing educational opportunities for adults should work together and provide effective services that are accessible to people across the community. My hon. Friend may or may not know that the disability rights task force is considering how its work on rights for people with disabilities can help to support and encourage the provision of such services. We look forward to its recommendations later in the year.

Mr. Patrick McLoughlin (West Derbyshire): Will the Leader of the House ensure that we have a statement, or an opportunity for a debate, on the national parks? Is she aware of the growing concern about the number of applications which are being submitted to national parks in respect of dormant quarries, and is the Government's view that the national parks have sufficient power to deal with them, even though there are serious questions about their power once appeals are made and about the cost of compensation? This is a matter of growing concern in the national parks—and I know that the right hon. Lady knows the Peak national park very well.

Mrs. Beckett: I understand the hon. Gentleman's concern. The national parks are a great treasure for us all. I believe that my right hon. Friend the Minister for the Environment has held discussions on the matter. I will draw his attention to the hon. Gentleman's remarks. He may have some information for him.

Mr. Tony McWalter (Hemel Hempstead): The centrality of biotechnology to the Government's science

policy is shown by the Government's papers on scientific research. Even in particle physics and astronomy, the presentation of the figures deals more with biological and life sciences than with physics, astronomy or mathematics. Does my right hon. Friend accept that there is widespread public disquiet about biological engineering and genetic modification of crops and food? Is not the centrality of biotechnology to the Government's science policy being rapidly eroded, if not evaporating, as a result of public loss of confidence in the strategy? I therefore hope that my right hon. Friend regards as urgent the need for a debate on science policy to dispel some of the myths so that we can consider judiciously the benefits and disbenefits of the technology and get the Government's science policy—perhaps somewhat amended—back on course.

Mrs. Beckett: I recognise my hon. Friend's point. There has been some public disquiet, partly, and understandably, based on experience of some recent problems. That obviously had an impact on discussion and balanced analysis of the advantages and disadvantages of various courses of action. I understand my hon. Friend's wish for a debate on science policy and I shall bear it in mind, but I am not sure that I can find time soon for such a debate. He knows that several recent reports have started to put arguments on various sides of the case, so we are not wholly dependent on debate in this House for a wider airing of the issues.

Mr. Tony Baldry (Banbury): The Immigration and Asylum Bill is of interest to all hon. Members, but Government information officers seem to be freer with information than Ministers are in briefing the House. The "Today" programme this morning carried a detailed explanation of the concessions that the Home Secretary is apparently making to buy off a revolt by Labour Back Benchers. If that is correct—it appears to be because it was such a detailed briefing—would it not be more courteous for the Home Secretary to write to all hon. Members to explain the concessions that he intends to make on Tuesday and why he intends to make them, so that we all have time to consider them? The impression was that the Government Whips would have rung round Back Benchers to brief them over the weekend, while the rest of us would have heard nothing until Tuesday.

Mrs. Beckett: I do not think that the hon. Gentleman can be entirely serious in suggesting that information and opportunities for debate have been withheld from the House. The Bill has been to Special Standing Committee precisely to encourage open, informed debate. Any changes that my right hon. Friend the Home Secretary may be considering—if he is—are no doubt in response to the many points made by the Committee and those who gave evidence to it. After all, the House exists to scrutinise legislation so that issues can be aired. I am well aware that the Government whom the hon. Gentleman supported regarded it as a black mark against Ministers if they listened to anything said by anyone who was not a member of the Government. We do not do things that way.

Mr. Peter Luff (Mid-Worcestershire): May I preface my main question by asking whether the Cologne summit has been reconvened? I understood that the Prime Minister made a statement on Tuesday on its conclusions.

Can the Leader of the House say whether the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry is likely to seek to make a statement next week on his decision on the Monopolies and Mergers Commission report on the supply of milk? He has had it for four months and the continued uncertainty is damaging the dairy industry and farmers. On a parliamentary note, my Committee—the Select Committee on Agriculture—is anxious to begin investigating the subject but cannot do so until the Secretary of State reaches a decision.

Mrs. Beckett: May I add to what I said a moment ago to the hon. Member for Banbury (Mr. Baldry)? I remind the House that my right hon. Friend the Home Secretary's answer to a parliamentary question on some of the issues relating to the Asylum and Immigration Bill is in *Hansard*. I meant to say that, but did not get round to it.

The hon. Member for Mid–Worcestershire (Mr. Luff) asked about the Cologne summit. I accept that I should not have used the shorthand and referred to "the" Cologne summit. There is a G8 summit coming up. I rather think that it is also taking place in Cologne, or at least in Germany. That is what I meant. I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for giving me the opportunity to make that clear.

As for the report on which the hon. Gentleman commented, I am afraid that I do not have information on it. I cannot enlighten him and cannot offer to find time for a discussion on it in the near future, but I undertake to draw his concerns to the attention of my right hon. Friend the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food.

Mr. Nick St. Aubyn (Guildford): During the recess, the Education and Employment Committee heard devastating evidence from the independent Bank of England on the employment consequences of joining the euro. The Deputy Governor said that it would take hundreds of years to know whether joining was a good idea. The Governor said that it would be an act of faith. When can we have a debate on the real threat to jobs from joining the euro?

Mrs. Beckett: I am aware of the evidence-taking sessions of the Education and Employment Committee. There is no proposal at the present time to join the euro, as I am sure the hon. Gentleman is well aware. All the issues must be borne in mind. That is precisely why the Government say that we have to consider the overall impact on Britain's national interest. If we were to have a debate on the matter in the near future—I cannot at present see my way to find time for it—it is just possible that people might get round to noticing that the Conservative party argues simultaneously that the high level of the pound is costing British jobs and that the low level of the euro is costing European jobs. It can argue one way or the other, but it will have some difficulty in continuing to argue both ways.

Mrs. Eleanor Laing (Epping Forest): Will the Leader of the House make time in the near future for a debate on an important matter relating to the way in which Parliament spends taxpayers' money—namely, the subject matter of early-day motion 709 on allowances for hon. Members representing Scottish constituencies?

[*That this House notes the decision of the Scottish Parliament to reduce the allowances of regional Members of the Scottish Parliament on the grounds that they do*

[Mrs. Eleanor Laing]

not have constituency responsibilities; further notes that honourable Members representing Scottish constituencies will also have fewer responsibilities after 1st July 1999; and consequently invites the Senior Salaries Review Board to consider whether it is appropriate for honourable Members representing Scottish constituencies to be paid an allowance similar to that of other honourable Members.]

The right hon. Lady may not as yet be aware that, earlier this week, the Scottish Parliament passed a motion that Members who sit for regional constituencies—those who have been elected on a list—should have a reduced allowance on the grounds that they do not have constituency responsibilities. Given that, after 1 July, Members of this House who sit for Scottish constituencies will have reduced constituency responsibilities because many of those responsibilities will be taken over by MSPs, surely the House ought to have an opportunity to debate whether Scottish Members of this House should continue to receive the same allowance as Members who still have full constituency responsibilities.

Mrs. Beckett: I certainly cannot undertake to find time for such a debate in the near future. I strongly hold the view, as the hon. Lady will know, that there is not, and should not be, such a thing as two different kinds of Member of Parliament. I should be surprised if my hon. Friends who sit for Scottish and Welsh constituencies—of course, they are only hon. Friends; there are no Scottish or Welsh Members on the Conservative Benches—find their work loads reduced. The hon. Lady is asking me to comment on a decision made by the Scottish Parliament, for which I am happy to say that I do not have responsibility.

Mr. Andrew Robathan (Blaby): This week, we have heard the Prime Minister extol the virtues of both the single market and the single currency. Will the Leader of the House give him the opportunity to come to the House to explain to us and to the people of this country why he has changed his mind? In 1983, he stood on a platform of leaving the European Community. In 1986, with the Labour party, he voted against the Single European Act, which set up the single market. The right hon. Lady may not be aware that, in 1986, when the right hon. Gentleman opposed the European monetary system, the precursor of economic and monetary union, he said:

"the EMS is essentially a deutschmark bloc. It could be said that we would be putting Herr Pöhl"—

the then president of the Bundesbank—

"in 11 Downing street."—[*Official Report*, 29 January 1986; Vol. 90, c. 990.]

Should we not now know why the Prime Minister not only believes that he was so fundamentally wrong on Europe for all that time, but thinks that people should vote for him today because he is now so miraculously right on it?

Mrs. Beckett: I certainly cannot undertake to find time for such a debate. Apart from anything else, it would clearly be a complete waste of time. It does not seem to have struck the hon. Gentleman that, although the Conservative party put through the Single European Act, many Conservative Members seem to regret it. If we are talking about people changing their minds, the Conservatives should look into their own record.

As to why my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister might have changed his mind since 1983, no doubt he did so for the same reasons that I changed mine. I was an anti-European and a sceptic long before some of those Conservative Members who now make those claims—and with much more assiduity than them. However, I realise that it was the decision of the British people to remain in the European Community and that that decision was reaffirmed in 1983. The balance of advantage and damage of staying in or coming out has long since swung in favour of our membership of the European Union, as it now is. In that case, there is no question but that it is in Britain's interests to work to make the greatest possible success of our membership of the European Union. That is the Government's goal, because we have long since concluded that to leave the EU would be a huge disaster for Britain. However, that seems to be the direction of the Conservative party.

Mr. David Heath (Somerton and Frome): I support the views expressed by the hon. Member for Mid-Worcestershire (Mr. Luff) about the importance of the publication of the Monopolies and Mergers Commission report into Milk Marque. That is crucial to dairy farmers and food processors in my constituency and throughout the country.

My main reason for rising is to welcome the debate on Kosovo. Will it cover not only the important subjects of foreign affairs and defence but the essential responsibilities of the Secretary of State for International Development? Will we consider the humanitarian efforts that have been accomplished during recent months and those that will be undertaken in the future? Will the debate cover the important question of the extent to which the budget of the Department for International Development will be protected to enable the Department to do its job, not only in the Balkans but elsewhere?

Mrs. Beckett: I cannot add to what I said earlier about the MMC report. I have undertaken to draw hon. Members' concerns to the attention of my right hon. Friend the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food.

I am sure that issues touching on the responsibilities of the Department for International Development are bound to be raised during the debate on Kosovo. That will give an opportunity for hon. Members to put questions such as those which the hon. Gentleman has just asked me.

Mr. John Bercow (Buckingham): Will the Leader of the House find time for a statement next week on any Government proposals which we can debate for a statutory allocation of time off for involvement in future European elections? I am sure that the right hon. Lady will understand that I make that request not because I want to bunk off myself—she knows that I am an assiduous attender of the Chamber—but for a different reason. Although Conservative Members of Parliament found plenty of time to campaign for national self-government and for Britain to be in Europe, but not run by Europe, I am genuinely concerned—on the grounds of the importance of the vitality of our democracy—that Ministers seemed unable to find time to

argue for Labour's policy of capitulation within the European Union. Does the right hon. Lady intend to address that point in future?

Mrs. Beckett: I was not quite clear for whom the hon. Gentleman was asking for time off during future European elections. I now understand that it is for the House—for Members of Parliament. If he has been paying attention—as I know that he does during Question Time—he may recall that I have pointed out previously that there is only one precedent for the House not sitting during European elections. That was in 1994, when the Conservative Government were desperate to avoid scrutiny of any kind.

As for Ministers not finding time to campaign, I am afraid that I must disappoint the hon. Gentleman: 250 campaign visits have been undertaken by Ministers since the local elections.

Mr. Bercow: Unnoticed.

Mrs. Beckett: Indeed, it is a matter of much concern to many of my right hon. and hon. Friends that they did not achieve more publicity. We have come to a conclusion as to why that is so; it is because we have been consistently advocating the same policy throughout the campaign, which the press find very boring, whereas the Conservatives, excitingly, change their policy every day.

BILLS PRESENTED

Food Standards

Mr. Nicholas Brown, supported by the Prime Minister, Mr. Secretary Prescott, Mr. Chancellor of the Exchequer, Mr. Secretary Reid, Mr. Secretary Dobson, Secretary Marjorie Mowlam and Mr. Secretary Michael, presented a Bill to establish the Food Standards Agency and make provision as to its functions, to amend the law relating to food safety and other interests of consumers in relation to food; to enable provision to be made in relation to the notification of tests for food-borne diseases; to enable provision to be made in relation to animal feedingstuffs; and for connected purposes: And the same was read the First time; and ordered to be read a Second time tomorrow, and to be printed [Bill 117].

Royal Parks (Trading)

Mr. Peter Brooke presented a Bill to make provision about certain offences under section 2 of the Parks Regulation (Amendment) Act 1926: And the same was read the First time; and ordered to be read a Second time tomorrow, and to be printed [Bill 116].

Defence in the World

[Relevant documents: The Third Report from the Defence Committee, Session 1998–99, on 'The future of NATO: The Washington Summit', HC 39, and the Government's response thereto, HC 459.]

Motion made, and Question proposed, That this House do now adjourn.—*[Mr. Mike Hall.]*

1.20 pm

The Secretary of State for Defence (Mr. George Robertson): The choice of title for this debate—defence in the world—could not be more appropriate. The defence and security of our country can be guaranteed only by looking beyond the immediate horizons of the United Kingdom. Our security is inextricably linked to the security of our continent and the wider world. As Kosovo has demonstrated only too well, it is only by standing firm with our friends and allies that we can secure peace and stability.

Britain's contribution to collective defence and international security is founded on a unique national asset—the capabilities and commitment of our armed forces. I am sure that the House will join me in paying tribute to the men and women of the Royal Navy, the Royal Air Force and the Army, and to their families and the civilians who support them, at a time when the demands that we place upon them are greater than ever.

During the strategic defence review, one of our concerns was the growing lack of knowledge and understanding in society as a whole about defence and the armed forces. In future, we might have to return to that problem of keeping defence in the public eye, but—for the time being at least—the role of the services and the skill and dedication of our service personnel are clear to everyone who picks up a newspaper or turns on a television. Kosovo provides an object lesson in the need to be able to deploy high-capability armed forces when diplomacy fails—a need that was at the heart of the strategic defence review.

Sadly, it took 11 weeks of concerted NATO bombing before Milosevic and his generals were prepared to agree terms for the withdrawal of Serb forces from that tragic province, thus paving the way for the introduction of an international military force to enable the return of the refugees. Now, we must ensure that the final diplomatic steps are taken, that the Serbs abide by their word, and that KFOR crosses the border as soon as possible. We hope that, very soon, the military focus will shift from the air campaign to the task facing the ground troops and all those engaged in the reconstruction of Kosovo. We wish them well.

On this remarkable day, it might help if I remind the House how we got to this position: how we worked, since at least February 1998, to try to get a political settlement and halt the violence then taking place in Kosovo; how we went the extra mile for peace; and how we adopted a series of economic sanctions in the European Union and a mandatory United Nations arms embargo on the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia. In October last year, as Ambassador Richard Holbrooke visited Belgrade against the background of a worsening security situation in Kosovo, we went back to the UN. We got a chapter VII resolution, determining that that was a threat to regional peace and security and that there was an imminent humanitarian catastrophe.

[Mr. George Robertson]

NATO played its part by threatening the use of force. Milosevic listened, because the threat was credible. In October, he did a deal with Holbrooke, promising to reduce the number of his forces and to restrict their operations, and to allow unarmed verifiers into Kosovo. He then reneged on his word and, through no fault of their own, the members of the Kosovo verification mission were unable to prevent matters from worsening. Then, in January, there was the massacre at Racak.

For 18 days in February, the parties were brought together, under joint British-American chairmanship, in the chateau at Rambouillet. A vital part of the Rambouillet accords concerned the military implementation arrangements; at their heart was a NATO-led military peacekeeping force to ensure a stable security situation in Kosovo. However, when the talks moved on to Paris, it was immediately apparent that Milosevic was unwilling to have any military implementation force at all and that he was simply creating obstacles to a settlement.

At this late stage, there was still a place for diplomacy—but Milosevic let it pass, calculating that the international community lacked resolution. How wrong he was. Since then, we have had more than 11 weeks of bombing, in which the Royal Air Force and Royal Navy submarine-launched cruise missiles played an important part.

Eventually, the pressure wore the Serbs down. We never said that it would be easy, and so it proved. On 2 June, Milosevic and the Serbian Parliament agreed a peace plan put to them on behalf of the international community by President Martti Ahtisaari of Finland and Viktor Chernomyrdin, the Russian representative. Last night, following considerable prevarication in the past few days, senior representatives of the Yugoslav army and of the Ministry of the Interior police signed the detailed agreement committing them to a tight withdrawal timetable.

Let me make one thing absolutely clear. The military technical agreement signed last night was not "negotiated" with the Serbs in the tent at Kumanovo. NATO made no concessions. Any changes to the agreement were made purely on the grounds of military practicability. General Sir Michael Jackson is no soft touch and he has done a remarkable job.

The task in front of General Jackson and the international community is formidable. The Serbs' track record of honouring promises is certainly not good. Once a verifiable—I emphasise that word—withdrawal has begun, there can be a pause in the bombing. The United Nations Security Council resolution, the text of which the G8 Foreign Ministers have already agreed, can then be passed. KFOR, with its strong NATO core and its unified command, can then deploy. Only when all Serb forces are out of Kosovo—and the security zone within Serbia itself—will the campaign be brought to an end.

Mr. David Heath (Somerton and Frome): Although I understand that this would not form part of the military technical agreement, is there any sign that Yugoslav army troop concentrations will also be withdrawn from Montenegro? Is there any way of monitoring the extent to which the Yugoslav forces remain in Montenegro in the next few months?

Mr. Robertson: No, because this agreement is about Kosovo and the campaign was about Kosovo. It has been agreed that the Serbian forces inside Kosovo will be withdrawn into other parts of Serbia, not into Montenegro. The hon. Gentleman's point about the importance of Montenegro is well taken. President Djukanovic, the elected President of Montenegro, is an individual of some character: he expressed several views during the conflict that clearly mark him as a man for the future.

We are very sensitive to the prevailing circumstances in that part of the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia. If, by some mischance, Milosevic had won and if alliance unity had not held strong, he would certainly have turned his attention from Kosovo—where he had succeeded in expelling a dissident population—to Montenegro and tried to subjugate it to the same form of dictatorship as appears to be his only ambition.

Mr. John Wilkinson (Ruislip-Northwood): The hon. Member for Somerton and Frome (Mr. Heath) made an important point. Will the NATO alliance monitor extremely carefully the possibility that Serb forces within Serbia—which can now be replaced by those withdrawing from Kosovo—will, as a consequence of the withdrawal from Kosovo, augment the Serbian military presence in Montenegro, thereby putting pressure on its civil democratic Government and potentially destabilising a fragile political situation?

Mr. Robertson: Yes, of course, we shall monitor the situation as it develops. As I have said, Montenegro is relevant to the future of the Balkans. We made it absolutely clear that, if Milosevic attempted to destabilise the Government of Montenegro, the NATO alliance and the wider international community would consider that of the utmost seriousness.

Kosovo is a tragedy. British soldiers, sailors, aircrew and ground crew have helped to prevent it from becoming a permanent disaster. They are bringing hope to hundreds of thousands of victims of this last great act of 20th century barbarity at the heart of our continent. Kosovo contains major lessons for the international community, and in analysing them we must beware of preparing to refight the last war. That process of analysis will be helped by the fact that, in most respects, Kosovo is an operation of the kind that we have been preparing to conduct since the strategic defence review. All the main themes of the review have applied in one form or another.

How can defence help to ensure that the next century is different, and that it is a century of dialogue rather than one of destruction? Our starting point must be a realistic assessment of the world in which we live and with which we have to deal.

Mr. Tam Dalyell (Linlithgow): Before the Secretary of State leaves the subject of Kosovo, I want to ask a question. He knows very well that an enormous problem faces any military personnel who have to distinguish between civilians and guerrillas. That will be particularly difficult in the case of the ethnic Albanian community and the Kosovo Liberation Army. What are the Secretary of

State's views on the disarming of the KLA? Will he tell the House what undertakings have been given by the KLA's chain of command?

Mr. Robertson: Of course there will be problems for the implementation force and KFOR, one of which is the problem that my hon. Friend has identified. If any of the Serb paramilitaries decide to stay out of uniform or if other irregulars do not obey their central command, the difficulty of identifying them and dealing with them will be formidable. However, I know that General Jackson has already faced up to that problem and I have absolutely no doubt that he has made plans.

The KLA will be part and parcel of the UN Security Council resolution, and its demilitarisation is a fundamental part of rebuilding the security of the area. The KLA's leadership have publicly made it clear that they will co-operate with the terms of the UN Security Council resolution and, having signed up to Rambouillet and the strictures applied by that agreement, they will take on themselves another obligation in the new circumstances.

As I said, we must have a realistic assessment of the world in which we live and with which we have to deal. We do not need rose-coloured spectacles that mislead us about the risks and challenges or comments of despair that leave us wringing our hands on the sidelines. There are those who have said, "We can do nothing. This is a civil war. Let the blood flow and eventually the situation will stabilise." We have conclusively proved those people wrong. I hope that, at some point, they will apologise for the situation that they would have created if we had been so foolish as to take their advice.

Two years on from the analysis of Britain's security priorities in the changing world that underpinned the strategic defence review, it gives me no pleasure or satisfaction to say that events have borne out our assessment. At the most strategic level, we still face no threat to our national survival, and the prospect of such a threat emerging in the foreseeable future looks, if anything, even more remote.

Instability, however, continues to bring human suffering on an almost unimaginable scale in its wake. In Europe, Kosovo is the starkest example of the consequences of the break-up of states and the ethnic and religious conflict that follows it. Further from home—in successive crises in central Africa, for example—the lesson that international peace and stability is about the lives of ordinary people has been repeated time and again.

The strategic defence review concluded that Britain had a clear national interest in working to deal with such problems and an equally clear responsibility to do so. The Government committed themselves to a security and defence policy based on engagement and not isolation. We pledged ourselves to use the armed forces as a force for good in the world and to play a leadership role that would enable us to make a difference. Our policy was not an easy option. With the benefit of hindsight, however, I am more firmly convinced than ever that it was the right option for the UK.

Today's challenge is to make the post-cold war institutional framework work more effectively. There has never been a single institutional answer to Britain's security requirements. Too often, however, we have sacrificed operational effectiveness for political symbolism. Our European defence initiative, which was developed in close partnership with France and has been embraced by allies and partners on both sides of the Atlantic, is designed to redress that balance.

At last week's European Council in Cologne, European Union Heads of State and Government endorsed progress so far on that initiative, and pointed the way forward. We are all determined that the EU should play a full role on the international stage. The in-coming Finnish presidency has been invited to take forward the work that is necessary to develop, in the EU, the means to take decisions on crisis-management tasks and political control of military operations.

I draw the House's attention in this context to the sterling contribution to resolving the Kosovo crisis made by the President of Finland, Martti Ahtisaari. We were all hugely impressed not just by his brilliant and eloquent English on our television screens but by the superb and elegant diplomacy that led to President Milosevic accepting the inevitable.

The agreement at last week's European summit in Cologne builds on NATO's Washington summit, where the allies stated their willingness to adopt arrangements for ready access by the EU to the collective assets and capabilities of the alliance. It is also fully consistent with the UK's approach to the European security and defence debate. We have argued for developing capabilities for defence decision making in the EU, while drawing the bulk of military capability from the forces which we and our allies contribute to NATO.

We have also consistently made it clear that this debate must address the shortfalls in European military capability. At Cologne, the EU member states committed themselves to developing more effective European military capabilities. That will—I say "will" and not "would" because I believe that there is a determination across our continent—allow us to make a stronger and more coherent contribution to NATO and to take action when the alliance as a whole is not engaged.

Mr. Andrew Robathan (Blaby): On capabilities, many people are concerned—I am sure that the Secretary of State is much concerned as well—that, given the stretching of our commitments and, perhaps, an unending commitment in Kosovo, we will not have the number of men required. Is he going to cover that subject, and say whether he intends to increase the number of soldiers in the armed forces?

Mr. Robertson: I remind the hon. Gentleman that we are increasing the size of the Army. By contrast with the previous drift downwards in numbers, the strategic defence review proposed an increase of 3,000 personnel. That is probably the first time that the Army has been increased by a peacetime defence review. The extra people will be used for the enhancements requested by the Army, which we believe are necessary.

Of course the present crisis, and the handling of the existing crises elsewhere, whether in Northern Ireland or Bosnia, will impose a strain, especially on human beings. Although recruitment has increased dramatically in some arms of the services since last year, because of the degree of overstretch, retention is becoming a bigger problem. That is a matter of concern for the House as a whole, especially for Ministers, and we are addressing it. I might

[Mr. Robertson]

point out to the hon. Gentleman that our objective is to increase the size of the Army beyond simply filling the gap in recruitment that we inherited, so as to make our forces stronger and more usable.

Mr. Menzies Campbell (North-East Fife): Last night, while answering questions on his helpful and welcome statement, the Secretary of State told the House that about 10 per cent. of the forces now deployed in Bosnia come from the Territorial Army. Has he now an open mind about the extent to which he should reconsider the assumptions in the strategic defence review about the Territorial Army, especially the assumptions about its numbers? If, as most people now accept, we are in for a long haul in Kosovo, is there not likely to be a requirement for more extensive use than expected of soldiers from the TA to ensure that our presence in Kosovo is maintained at proper strength?

Mr. Robertson: We are always looking to see where the reserve forces can help the regular forces. That is why, alongside the increase in the regular strength of the Army, we reshaped and restructured the Territorial Army so that in circumstances such as those that we now face, it will be more relevant and useful.

I wish that those who speak out about the Territorial Army would recognise that the reforms that we put in place have now been accepted by the Territorial, Auxiliary and Volunteer Reserve Association and the TA and are being implemented with enthusiasm. We are already hearing strong messages from the TA that it has got precisely what it asked for. The training time has been increased, better equipment is now available, and the TA is being directed towards more relevant functions. All that is designed specifically to make it more usable, more integrated and more deployable, so that, when their country needs them, the TA's forces will be available.

There is little or nothing left of the grumbling now. People are getting on with the job that they have been set and making it work. They are content that the right decision was taken at the right time, and that the Territorial Army has a considerable future role to play within the forces. I hope that people with genuine concerns will recognise that our purpose was to prepare for the sort of conditions that exist now, rather than having large numbers of people in the Territorial Army trained up for functions completely irrelevant to the present moment.

Mr. Gerald Howarth (Aldershot): The right hon. Gentleman suggested that his increase in the regular Army would meet the needs of the commitments already under way. However, the additional troops are not expected to be fully in place until 2004. In the meantime, what percentage of Land Command is committed to operations?

Does the right hon. Gentleman not understand that, if I may say as much to him, he is giving a slight impression of complacency? He has great ambitions for Britain to play a role in the world, yet he seems not to will the means by which those ambitions can be fulfilled. As I said to him last night, it is likely that our troops will be heavily committed for a long time in Kosovo.

Mr. Robertson: I certainly do not feel complacent. Yes, I feel fatigue that is tinged with elements of relief and pride, but not complacent when so many of our troops are engaged in what, over the next few days, will be dangerous activity by any standards.

When I say that we produced a strategic defence review and that I intend to have it implemented, I am talking not from complacency but from a driving ambition that we shall match our ambitions as a nation with our capabilities. I shall not be partisan because I know that most people have forgotten that there was a Government before the Labour Government. However, we inherited— *[Interruption.]* The Opposition are trying to forget that more than the country is. We are not even allowed to mention the Conservative Government any more.

We inherited a very serious manning situation. That was especially so in the Army but it applied in the other two arms as well. It is a problem that we are addressing. My hon. Friend the Minister for the Armed Forces who, because of a family bereavement, unfortunately cannot be in the Chamber, has done sterling work. I believe that the figures for Army recruitment are up by 17 per cent. on last year's. We are also addressing the problems of retention, which will make up the balance. There is no complacency about our determination to ensure that we have and retain the best armed forces. As for the specific question about the number of troops who are on operations, I shall give the House the latest figures in a moment.

The House might like to be informed of the situation in the outside world. I understand that the latest information from NATO is that Supreme Allied Commander Europe is unlikely to be in a position to verify the withdrawal of Serb forces by 3 pm, as was earlier anticipated. This will inevitably delay somewhat the passing of the Security Council resolution. We have always made it clear that the withdrawal of Serb troops, which we are confident will take place, must be proven and verifiable before we move into the next stages. When we receive information, I shall ensure that the House is kept informed.

Defence and security policy is much more than large-scale multinational operations and sweeping diplomatic initiatives.

Sir Geoffrey Johnson Smith (Wealden): A propos the right hon. Gentleman's comment about there being no signal that Serb forces have begun withdrawal, how long are we prepared to wait until we get this signal? Was there not a statement made at some time during the past few days that, if they did not comply with what they had agreed, bombing would be restarted? Am I correct in that?

Mr. Robertson: Yes. It has been made clear that, if there was any non-compliance with the agreement that has been arrived at, the air assaults will recommence. We mean that; we mean business. I did not say that there had been no withdrawals. I said that SACEUR was not yet in a position to verify withdrawals. There were certainly signs this morning that some troop formations, which could well have been preparations for movement, were taking place. It is only when we are certain that there have been withdrawals that we shall pause from the bombing campaign. We are still hopeful that that will be done, but our patience is not endless.

As I have said, defence and security policy is much more than large-scale multinational operations and huge diplomatic initiatives. It must embrace all activities that

can contribute to stability and security, and hence to preventing crisis and conflict. The strategic defence review gave renewed impetus to defence diplomacy in activities of this kind.

In parallel with the grander initiatives, the armed forces make a contribution to humanitarian missions that all too often goes unrecognised. For example, in Sierra Leone, they have helped to deliver essential food and medical supplies, to clear wells contaminated by rebel forces and to re-open local schools that were damaged during the nightmare of fighting that took place in that country.

For the longer term, we are now helping to get Sierra Leone back on its feet by contributing training and advice for the creation of democratically accountable armed forces. Using the armed forces' skills for defence diplomacy and in operations of this kind is an investment in conflict prevention and crisis management that results in vital but often unquantifiable benefits.

The armed forces have also played an important role in the fight against the international drugs trade. Last week, HMS Marlborough seized 4 tonnes of cocaine in an operation in the Caribbean—its second seizure inside a week. That was an excellent example of co-operation between the United States and the United Kingdom in the fight against drugs activity in the Caribbean, which was highlighted in the strategic defence review.

The MOD takes seriously its commitment to the security of UK nationals overseas and can deploy effectively and at short notice when there is a possible threat to the lives of British citizens overseas. That commitment has been demonstrated most notably in response to conflicts in Africa over the past 12 months—in Sierra Leone, the Congo and Eritrea.

At the heart of the strategic defence review was the recognition that security depends upon our willingness and ability to deploy high-capability armed forces when diplomacy fails. Sadly, that has been underlined by recent events.

Our forces must be deployable at short notice and in difficult and inhospitable terrain. They must be sustainable, often with the minimum of host nation support, and in operations that will inevitably be prolonged. We are obliged to maintain concurrent commitments with separate lines of communication, as we see in Kosovo, Bosnia and the Gulf.

Operations are placing a premium on precision weapons and force protection. With 50 per cent. of the British Army now engaged in, preparing for, or recovering from, operations, we cannot afford the luxury of unusable forces. No one could have predicted precisely the nature of our commitment in Kosovo, but the strategic defence review provided a template that fits in most respects.

Indeed, the main problems that we face are in exactly those capability areas in which shortfalls were identified in the SDR but in which, barely a year after the publication of the report, implementation has not yet been completed. The strategic air and sea transport, additional soldiers to man the second line of logistic communications, and the extra deployable brigade for the Army, all of which are in the pipeline, would all have been welcome enhancements to our Kosovo commitment.

As I said, the high level of commitments leads to increased pressure on individuals, especially in some of the critical specialisations. Until the necessary restructuring identified by the strategic defence review is complete and full manning, particularly in the Army, is achieved, many of our people will be redeploying on operational commitments more often than is desirable for operational effectiveness or the health of family life for our armed forces.

Those who are affected are not only from the "teeth" arms, such as armoured infantry battalions and air crew, but from elements of the very important supporting arms, such as communications personnel. We are vigorously pushing ahead to achieve the restructuring and full manning to relieve pressure on our people and their families.

In opening the debate, I have inevitably concentrated to a large extent on Kosovo. It is right that we should focus on the greatest challenge to security and stability in Europe since the end of the cold war. However, it would be a mistake to treat the circumstances of Kosovo as unique. Milosevic, ethnic hatred and ethnic cleansing, the humanitarian crises in south-eastern Europe and more widely, the risks of overspill and destabilisation—all these carry powerful lessons for every one of us.

I spoke at the outset about keeping defence in the public eye. We must not cease to strive to ensure that defence in Britain is stronger and better integrated into society, so that the contribution made by our service men and women as a force for good in peacetime, crisis and conflict in the world will go on. We must be prepared to contribute as well.

Long after NATO has achieved its objectives in Kosovo, long after the headline writers have moved on to the next subject and the next crisis, a job of work will still be being done in that area, as it is in Kosovo today, by men and women who, supported by the civilians who back them up and by the families who are an integral part of that great team, have committed themselves to international law and order. Without them, it would be a much more dangerous world for future generations.

1.55 pm

Mr. John Maples (Stratford-on-Avon): Kosovo has dominated defence and foreign policy issues for some three months now, almost to the exclusion of everything else. I shall use today's debate to talk about one or two other issues that may not have had the attention that they deserve during the last three months.

The Secretary of State spent a lot of time talking about Kosovo, and not much on other issues, perhaps because, as appeared, he did not have anything new or interesting to say about them. However, there have been some interesting developments, and I want to spend some time on the European security and defence identity.

Before I do so, I shall say a word about the timing of the debate. We have one debate a year on defence policy, which is important. Defence is not high on the political agenda at the moment, but it is fundamental to our security. It is the only one of three debates in which the Secretary of State has spoken, yet the Government have scheduled it on European elections day, when they must know that hardly any hon. Members will be here. I am sure that it is not the day that the Secretary of State himself would have chosen, but will he have a word with the business managers to see whether future debates can be held on a day when many more hon. Members are present? A Thursday would usually be a good choice, but not when the European elections are being held.

[Mr. John Maples]

I want to consider one or two issues briefly before coming to the European defence identity. Defence industries are undergoing a major restructuring. I am delighted to see the British Aerospace-Marconi merger, which I hope will successfully jump all the regulatory hurdles.

The policy pushed by the Government and initiated by other European Heads of Government to try to create a European defence and aerospace conglomerate was misconceived. If we do not maintain a transatlantic link, we shall not be anywhere. The fortress Europe against the fortress America model, which that would have created, would have led us down a blind alley. The Americans spend three times as much on defence research as Britain, France and Germany combined. If we had cut ourselves off from the United States in terms of markets and technology, we would have gone down a blind alley for which we would have paid for a long time.

The commercial realities that British Aerospace and GEC have introduced give us some hope that one of the three or four global defence companies, which I imagine will develop during the next few years, will have a significant British component and British base, both in employment and technology. I hope that those commercial considerations will continue to prevail, that transatlantic links will be developed between European and north American defence corporations and that we shall not try to corral people into United States and European manufacturing fortresses.

The Secretary of State touched on the strategic defence review, rather optimistically because Kosovo has revealed some weaknesses in that in terms of a mismatch between resources and commitment. Overstretch is getting worse. We shall want to take a detailed look at that when the war is over, as that will probably be the right time to do so. We do not know what the long-term troop commitment to Kosovo will be, or whether it will extend into other parts of the Balkans, as I suspect that it will. I suspect that we shall have a long-term commitment in Bosnia and Kosovo, and perhaps elsewhere as well. My hon. Friend the Member for Mid-Norfolk (Mr. Simpson) will deal with that in more detail when he replies.

What is happening with regard to the Bloody Sunday inquiry is appalling. I wrote to the Secretary of State about that some time ago. I know that the Ministry of Defence is trying to help those involved, but, if the inquiry has handed over the names of serving paratroop officers to lawyers for the victims, that is an extraordinarily cavalier way to deal with people's lives and safety and the security of their families. I know that the matter is back in court for judicial review of the inquiry's ruling, and I do not intend to talk about the ruling for that reason, but I urge the Secretary of State to do everything that he can to make sure that that simply does not happen. If anything happened to those families or those soldiers, it would be an inexcusable lapse of duty—

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Mr. Michael Lord): Order. I think the hon. Gentleman has made his point and it would be advisable if he did not pursue it any further.

Mr. Maples: Thank you, Mr. Deputy Speaker.

Mr. Gerald Howarth: My hon. Friend has mentioned the part that is being played by the Ministry of Defence in supporting the soldiers concerned in their legal costs, and that is to be welcomed warmly. Is he aware that I wrote to the Prime Minister, who has ultimate responsibility for those matters, on 11 May and 8 June, and that I have not had the courtesy of a substantive reply from him? Is that not disgraceful?

Mr. Maples: Yes, it is, but I must say that I received a reply from the Secretary of State and we have talked about this matter, which my hon. Friend has pursued assiduously; he represents Aldershot, where the Parachute Regiment is based, and I hope that he will continue to press his case. The solution to the problem is in the Government's hands and they could alter the terms of reference of the inquiry to provide anonymity.

Mr. George Robertson: There is a judicial review; the matter is in the courts today and it would be highly improper for any of us to discuss it in Parliament. However, the hon. Gentleman chose to raise the issue of the allegations that are being made about the disclosure of some of the soldiers' names. That is, first and foremost, a matter for the independent inquiry and its spokesmen have said that it is investigating the circumstances in which the documents were released and the status of those papers in terms of their earlier public availability. We are of course concerned about the safety of any individuals and we are urgently considering what needs to be done.

Mr. Maples: Some matters are absolutely for the inquiry; I completely agree and I have not touched on those.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. I repeat what I said earlier: nothing more ought to be said on that particular subject and we ought to move on.

Mr. Maples: A public consultation is taking place on the Government's proposals for the Defence Evaluation and Research Agency, and we will respond in some detail to that, but we are concerned about total privatisation. Certainly partial privatisation—*[Interruption.]* No, the reason is that some agencies of government are not performing quasi-commercial activities and the Government need them as an independent source of advice and evaluation. They need such advice on computers and telecommunications—they have an agency, which they have not privatised—and I think that they need it on defence.

If the Government were to rely on commercial organisations—which are motivated by commercial considerations and could be in partnership with a competitor to a bid that they were evaluating—it would be difficult for them to know that they were receiving independent, objective advice. Whatever the outcome and whatever the solution, we want them to make sure that they have available to them independent and objective evaluation of, and advice on, defence proposals and technologies. It is, of course, important that the manufacturers involved in Government deals also have confidence in that arrangement.

Before moving on to European defence, let me say a word about Bishopton. We have the basis of a problem in other areas because, in pursuit of reduced costs, the Government are inviting people from around the world to bid for contracts. Foreign suppliers bid on a marginal cost

basis, but the Governments for whom they work do not usually put their own contracts out to tender. In the case of Bishopton, foreign companies were able to bid on the basis of marginal cost and their costs were financed by contracts with their own Governments, which were not put out to tender. Royal Ordnance, however, has to bid for such contracts on a full-cost basis. That may save the Government some money, but an absolutely inevitable consequence is that organisations such as Royal Ordnance will disappear and we will be reliant on foreign suppliers. We have been in trouble with that in the past.

The Secretary of State said that he was not prepared to spend £20 million—arguably, the figure is considerably less than that—but we have to be 100 per cent. certain that we are prepared to rely on foreign supplies for ammunition. It is one thing to buy aeroplanes or tanks from foreign countries—once we have them, we have them—but buying renewable supplies such as the ammunition needed to make aeroplanes or tanks of any military use at all is a different matter altogether.

I turn to the development of the European security and defence identity and its relationship with NATO. We have seen a 180 degree U-turn in Government policy. This was not Government policy during the election, and it was not Government policy during the strategic defence review, whose report made no reference to the European Union's having any role here. In fact, it said:

"Development of the European Security and Defence Identity within NATO will enable the Western European Union to carry out these roles".

At the Amsterdam summit two years ago, the Prime Minister spoke of the proposals to which he signed up in Cologne last week. He said that Europe's defence should remain a matter for NATO and not the EU, which had proved itself unable to run a successful foreign policy.

"What matters is what works; and what works for Britain and for Europe is NATO,"

he said. The Franco-German plan was

"like an ill-judged transplant operation".

What was an ill-judged transplant operation in May 1997 has apparently become the solution to all our problems in May 1999. That is a 180-degree U-turn, of which we have had absolutely no explanation. It is no use the Secretary of State pretending that it is not a great big change. Whether it is right or wrong is a matter for debate, but to say that there has been no change is to fly in the face of the evidence.

It all changed in the run-up to the Portschacht summit in Austria at the end of last year. While the debate on the strategic defence review was proceeding in the House, the Prime Minister was briefing the political editor of *The Times* that he was prepared to drop Britain's long-standing objections to the EU's having a defence capability. That was confirmed at the Portschacht summit, when the Prime Minister spoke of developing mechanisms that were "complementary to NATO"—not part of NATO, but complementary to it.

As I have said, this represents a fundamental shift. On 19 October—on the same day, and probably at the very same hour, that the Prime Minister was briefing Phil Webster—the Secretary of State told the House:

"The Government's view on the common foreign and security policy and how it relates to European defence was determined definitively at the Amsterdam summit . . . The challenge for the European Union is . . . to apply the common foreign and security policy to events".—[*Official Report*, 19 October 1998; Vol. 317, c. 974.]

That reiteration of the Amsterdam position took place exactly when the Prime Minister was doing his 180-degree U-turn.

Winding up the debate on the following day, the Under-Secretary said exactly the same. He had not been brought up to speed at that point. He said:

"We are also playing a central role in developing an effective European security and defence identity in NATO."—[*Official Report*, 20 October 1998; Vol. 317, c. 1176.]

The Prime Minister is clearly talking about the possibility of doing something outside NATO.

Others realised the significance of the Prime Minister's point. In "Bulletin Quotidien Europe" of 26 to 27 October, a couple of days later, the Prime Minister was seen as going much further than he had in his *Times* interview. This was considered to be the sign of a true reversal of British policy, which was traditionally hostile to the European Union's responsibility for security and defence matters. It may not have been seen as a reversal of policy by Defence Ministers, but that is how it was seen by our allies and partners in Europe.

My hon. Friend the Member for Reigate (Mr. Blunt) was so concerned about the change of attitude that he secured an Adjournment debate. [HON. MEMBERS: "Where is he?"] I have no idea where he is, but I am sure that he will be here on Thursday to make his points in the Kosovo debate.

My hon. Friend performed a useful service to the House, because, in replying to his Adjournment debate, the Under-Secretary rather let the cat out of the bag by saying that his aim was

"to enable the European Union to have a more united and influential voice".—[*Official Report*, 11 November 1998; Vol. 319, c. 301.]

It had taken a couple of weeks to bring the Under-Secretary up to speed, but he was up to speed by then.

Mr. Robathan: My hon. Friend is absolutely right about the common European security and defence identity. However, I feel that I must apologise in advance for the absence of my hon. Friend the Member for Reigate (Mr. Blunt) on Thursday. I happen to know that he will be visiting the Duma on that day.

Mr. Maples: I am told that my hon. Friend the Member for Reigate is out campaigning in the European elections today. No doubt, that is what all the other 200 or 300 hon. Members who would be present if this were not the day of the European elections are doing.

Let us be clear about what we are discussing. We are discussing a European security and defence identity—not an identity within NATO, as set out in the 1996 Berlin NATO summit, by the Prime Minister in Amsterdam or by the Secretary of State for Defence during the debate on the strategic defence review, but a European Union military capability. That is fundamentally different.

The Prime Minister took his position a little further in an article in the *New York Times* on 12 November, where he said:

"To speak with authority, the European Union also needs to be able to act militarily on its own . . . Britain backs that".

[Mr. Maples]

The next day, at the North Atlantic Assembly in Edinburgh, he did the same by saying:

"We must change this, by ensuring that the EU can speak with a single, authoritative voice on the key international issues of the day, and can intervene effectively where necessary."

Dr. Julian Lewis (New Forest, East): Does my hon. Friend agree that the key point about a common foreign and security policy is not simply whether European NATO states and EU states that are not in NATO agree to work in harmony on defence issues, but whether a majority of those states can impose a defence or foreign policy commitment on a minority of those states that might disagree?

Mr. Maples: My hon. Friend makes a good point. Clearly, at present, that is a separate pillar of the European Union, and it will require unanimity to do anything, but we have been down that road a few times before on other subjects. We find that what starts out requiring unanimity soon does not. I will come to our reasons for thinking that European defence is much better dealt with in NATO than within the European Union and why it will be dangerous to have two overlapping alliances.

Mr. Menzies Campbell: I am most interested in the hon. Gentleman's analysis. As he knows, I take a much more sympathetic view towards the idea of a European security and defence identity. If his fears are well founded, why is it that, in the United States, there has been support for the initiative that the Government have been taking, with the support of others, including ourselves?

Mr. Maples: I will come to the United States position, but it is not supportive of that idea. It supports the development of the European security and defence identity within NATO. It makes that clear again and again. What was agreed at Cologne breaches the principles that Madeleine Albright set out in her *Financial Times* article about decoupling, discrimination and duplication. When one talks to American diplomats and the American State Department privately, they say that they are very concerned about the matter. I will come to why that is so.

Therefore, there has been a fundamental shift in defence policy. There has been no change of circumstances. There has been no international event to provoke the necessity for rethinking our defence alliance arrangements. There has been no explanation of why the shift has happened. The House of Commons has not had an explanation of why the Government have thought it appropriate to make a 180 degree change on defence policy.

It is a big change. We have had no explanation. The Secretary of State made no attempt to explain it today, and the Prime Minister made no attempt to explain it on Tuesday, because it is being done not for its own sake but for the sake of good relations with Europe. If we can throw a few British interests into the pot to have a better weekend in Austria, Cologne or wherever it is, let us do it. It has been done not to improve our security, but because the UK is not in the euro.

We are running up from 1 January 1999. Everyone else will be in the euro. The Prime Minister wants to be at the centre of Europe, at the core of decision-making. He is getting left behind because we are not in the euro. He needs to find something else that will get him into it. That is an appalling way to govern the country, where the UK's national interest is not put first; the Prime Minister's ego is. It is, apparently, not enough for him to enjoy the sycophantic adulation from his Back Benchers; he needs it abroad as well.

I cannot think why the Prime Minister bothers to go to these meetings because he just signs up to anything that the French or Germans put in front of him. We saw that then. We saw it at St. Malo and in Cologne. We saw it when the presidency document on the matter was signed by the Government without debate or criticism. That is not the right way to look after our interests.

Our position on the issue is what it has always been and what the Government's was until 19 October last year: the development of a European security and defence identity within NATO is an excellent idea. Michael Portillo was at the forefront of the initiative at the Berlin NATO summit in 1996. We are all for more European military co-operation.

The relationship between British and French forces at operational level is fantastic. It should be developed. We are the two countries most serious about defence in Europe. We are all for greater interoperability, which we need if we are to act together in joint task forces in Kosovo and such places. We need to do things together. We need to set up mechanisms by which Europeans can act without the United States if the United States does not want to be involved—we all agree about that—but that is in place. That was set up at Berlin. The arrangements were set up to allow that to be done, using the Western European Union and NATO planning and command structures that are already in place.

The United States made it clear that, in those circumstances, it would make available its heavy lift, intelligence and communication assets, which we do not have. We cannot undertake such operations without those assets. We do not have them, but the United States has said that it would make them available.

We do not support the responsibility being transferred to the European Union. It will undermine NATO. We will have two parallel overlapping alliances with slightly different agendas in Europe. If it undermines NATO, it will undermine the United States's commitment to NATO and to the security of Europe. That is fundamental.

The European Union is not able to have common policies in those areas not because the institutional framework is not in place, but because we are different sovereign states with different interests, agendas and histories. We find it difficult to agree on those things. If we had the same objectives, we would have no difficulty in acting together, as we have, for example, over Kosovo. It is not the machinery that is at fault.

Mr. Andrew Mackinlay (Thurrock): I am straining to understand the mischief that the hon. Gentleman is describing. If he looks at the *Official Report* later, he will find that he said, among a long litany of things, that there could be circumstances where there could be some conflict in Europe with which the United States does not wish to be involved; I think that he said that.

Therefore, it seems plainly obvious that we need to have the mechanisms and institutions with which Europe can respond collectively. Inexorably, logic tells us that the vehicle for that must be the European Union.

Mr. Maples: I thought that I said that we supported what was initiated at the Berlin NATO summit in 1996, which made arrangements under which the European members of NATO could act without the United States, using NATO planning, command and control procedures and American assets. There may be circumstances in which the Europeans want to act without the United States. At the moment, it is difficult to envisage that happening because we seem incapable of doing anything without the United States taking the lead. Kosovo is an interesting example of something that the Americans probably would expect us in Europe to be able to sort out by ourselves, but which we clearly could not either at an operational level or in terms of leadership. If we get to the point where we can, let us be able to do it—I have no problem with that—but the arrangements are in place by which one can undertake the task through NATO.

I come to the American opposition to the moves. It is significant and it was signalled way back in June last year, when William Cohen, the United States Secretary of Defence, said that its commitment to a greater role for Europe was evidenced by its support for WEU as a vehicle for strengthening the European pillar of NATO and for the European security and defence identity within NATO. He made it clear then that the United States saw the development as something that would happen within NATO, but the Prime Minister took the policy further by signing an agreement with the French in December in St. Malo. That is where it is out in the open.

Paragraph 3 of that agreement says that

"the European Union will also need to have recourse to suitable military means (European capabilities pre-designated within NATO's European pillar)"—

the things that were envisaged at Berlin—

"or national or multinational European means outside the NATO framework."

Clearly, that was seen by President Chirac as a major shift in policy. It was no wonder that he was pleased because the French have been pursuing that agenda for some time. He succeeded in changing the opinion that successive British Governments had held for many years and in opening a chink in the United States-United Kingdom relationship, something that has long been a French policy objective. It is not fully integrated into NATO. Unfortunately, we did not succeed in getting it fully integrated two or three years ago when we made serious efforts to do so.

The United States's response to that was again cautious. James Foley, the State Department spokesman, said:

"In general terms, we are encouraged by the document's references to strengthening the capability of Europe's armed forces so that they can react rapidly to new circumstances, to contributing to NATO's vitality, and to preserving the alliance's prerogatives."

"We want a European partner that is capable of acting"—

nothing about anything independent happening outside NATO and within the European Union.

Madeleine Albright wrote a definitive article a few days after that in the *Financial Times*. The American position was made politely, in the friendly way that we would expect from our closest ally, but absolutely clearly. She said:

"We will examine all proposals on European defence and security with a simple question in mind: does it improve our effectiveness in working together? . . . the emphasis should be placed on enhancing the practical capabilities Europe brings to our alliance.

This means avoiding what I would call the Three Ds.

First, we want to avoid decoupling: NATO is the expression of the indispensable transatlantic link. It should remain an organisation of sovereign allies, where European decision-making is not unhooked from broader alliance decision-making."

What happened at Cologne does exactly that—it unhooks European decision making from alliance decision making. Mrs. Albright continued:

"Second, we want to avoid duplication: defence resources are too scarce for allies to conduct force planning, operate command structures, and make procurement decisions twice—once at NATO and once more at the EU."

However, Cologne sets up a series of committees and staff structures. It talks of developing satellite, intelligence and heavy lift capability, all of which is duplication on already stretched budgets. She continued:

"third, we want to avoid any discrimination against NATO members who are not EU members."

The Cologne document makes a passing reference to making some arrangements by which those members can be involved, but important members of NATO are not members of the EU—Turkey, Norway and the three new members, Poland, Hungary and the Czech Republic. There will probably be more. Those states will not be involved.

The Western European Union provided a forum in which all of those states could be involved and have access to NATO assets. We are now developing something that excludes those states. At Cologne, all those principles were broken.

It is pretty clear where our European partners are going. In February, Emma Bonino wrote an article in the *Financial Times* saying:

"Now Europe has Emu, it should try for DMU—defence and military union."

Mr. Prodi, the new President of the European Commission said in "On the Record" two weeks ago that Europe needed to develop its own army to enable it to act quickly to intervene in crises like Kosovo.

That is how they see it. What the Germans, French and Italians want is clear and we are going along with it. No doubt, we think that we can get off this roundabout, or this train, at some point and that we do not have to go the whole way. It is 100 per cent. clear to me where those countries want to go and it is not in our interests to go there with them. There should be some extremely good reason for doing what seems to me to be acting against our national interest and the views of the United States.

Mr. George Robertson: Given circumstances in the world today and the situation in Kosovo at this very moment, I find it remarkable that the hon. Gentleman should engage in a theological discussion that seems to play only to the Back Benches. Why, among all the documentation and bits of paper that he has produced has he not mentioned the Washington communiqué of the

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NATO summit? Perhaps he intends to read this passage out—it is certainly worth reading. The communiqué stated:

"We welcome"—

that is, the 19 nations of NATO—

"the new impetus given to the strengthening of a common European policy in security and defence for the Amsterdam Treaty and the reflections launched since then in the WEU and—following the St. Malo declaration—in the EU, including the Vienna European Council Conclusions."

The next paragraph states:

"On the basis of the above principles and building on the Berlin decisions, we therefore stand ready to define and adopt the necessary arrangements for ready access by the European Union to the collective assets and capabilities of the Alliance, for operations in which the Alliance as a whole is not engaged militarily as an Alliance."

That communiqué was backed by the United States and members of NATO, who are not all members of the EU. They signed up to it. How come it is only the British Conservative party that stands isolated again?

Mr. Maples: It is not a question of being isolated. I will come to those documents, which make it clear that what NATO agreed to, and the United States is happy about, is the development of that capability within NATO. However, what was talked about at Cologne is outside NATO and is not what was agreed at Washington or what people were happy about. The change in policy raises the concerns of the United States.

After Cologne, the German Defence Minister said:

"There is a single market, a single currency and an intense economic co-operation and we need something comparable in foreign and security policy."

President Chirac said that the creation of a European defence identity was the next major project of European unification after the introduction of the euro.

Ambassador Vershbow said—this is the noted American caution—that

"It is important . . . that the transatlantic link not be weakened . . . That means avoiding . . . duplication of assets or discrimination against non-EU allies . . . We will be assessing the results of today's EU Summit in Cologne with these considerations mind."

Let us consider what happened in Washington. In the new strategic concept, which is the really important document, there is only one reference to this matter, in paragraph 30, which is headed, "The European Security and Defence Identity". It clearly talks about that being within NATO, stating:

"On the basis of decisions taken by the Alliance, in Berlin in 1996 and subsequently, the European Security and Defence Identity will continue to be developed within NATO."

My concern is that it is being developed outside NATO. We are perfectly happy about development within NATO—I have no difficulty with that. The Secretary of State quoted the communiqué, which is a less important document than the new strategic concept, as I am sure the right hon. Gentleman would agree.

Mr. Robertson: No.

Mr. Maples: It is. What is more, the communiqué seems to have been drafted by someone completely different, on the hoof at the summit, as I understand that it was because some countries—Turkey in particular—had considerable misgivings about the original draft of the document.

Mr. Robertson: They agreed it.

Mr. Maples: After some redrafting. The communiqué makes it perfectly clear that development should take place within the WEU. It reaffirms our commitment—*[Interruption.]* The Secretary of State should listen before he crows too hard about his reading of the agreement. *[Interruption.]*

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. The Secretary of State must not keep interrupting from a sedentary position.

Mr. Maples: I have no problem about that being done inside the Alliance but it is being done outside it. As the United States keeps pointing out, the mechanisms were put in place at Berlin. It wants the ESDI to be firmly anchored within NATO but what is set up at Cologne is something different. It is a European Union structure to develop a military capability outside NATO. It is a parallel and overlapping alliance—a recipe for confusion. The United States is concerned that it will act as a caucus within NATO and that EU members of NATO will meet first to decide a collective position to take to NATO. It breaks all those three Ds—discrimination, duplication and decoupling—that Mrs. Albright set out and it undermines US commitment to NATO, and for what? What is the purpose? What is the change of circumstances that led to it? It would be useful if it helped to advance British interests, but I do not believe that it does. It is all for the sake of being, in some rather intangible sense, at the heart of Europe. There is no advantage for the country, even if it makes European summits nicer for the Prime Minister.

As the Secretary of State pointed out, we are doing this in the light of what is happening in Kosovo. Surely the lesson of our military intervention there is that we are in capable of doing such things without the United States and without American military capability and leadership. The United States would love us to be able to develop more European capability, but we cannot handle Kosovo by ourselves. Of the 1,100 military aircraft that I understand have been involved in operations, 80 per cent. have been from the United States. There was no question of any aggressive ground intervention without the involvement of American troops. That decision was always going to be made in Washington. Therefore, at best, the European Union is taking a pretentious stance. Frankly, it is going to be a fantasy unless we are all prepared to spend much more on defence.

Mr. Dalyell: I have been following the hon. Gentleman's speech with great interest. What does he see as the role of the United Nations in Kosovo? Should not it have been brought in at the earliest stage specifically before any military action was taken?

Mr. Maples: I do not want to be drawn into the debate about Kosovo because we will debate that next Thursday and we have been over that ground many times. We have

spent much more time on Kosovo than on the European defence identity. Furthermore, if we had waited for the United Nations to act, we would not be anywhere near a solution that would have secured Kosovo for the Kosovar Albanians.

What the EU wants to do will work only if it is prepared to spend an awful lot more on defence.

Mr. Robertson: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for allowing me to intervene as I thought that the House would want to know that the Secretary-General of NATO, Javier Solana, has announced the suspension of air strikes.

Mr. Maples: I am delighted to hear that, as is everyone else in the House, I am sure. Presumably, the next step is that the Security Council will pass a resolution and KFOR will move into Kosovo. I think that the Secretary of State was pointing out to me from his seat that a substantial British contingent is involved and we all wish them well. In some ways, the most difficult part of the Kosovo operation is about to begin. It involves danger to far more military personnel than has the air operation. They will encounter difficulties.

I was talking about defence spending. The development of a parallel military capability makes some sense if we are prepared to spend a lot of money on it. We shall have to duplicate some of what happens already in NATO in command and control structures, and intelligence satellite facilities. It will cost a lot of money. Yet, we are all cutting defence spending. The Government are cutting defence spending by roughly £1 billion over the three years of the defence review. The United Kingdom and France are the only European Union members, other than Greece and Portugal, that spend more than 2 per cent. of their GDP on defence. Germany spends only 1.5 per cent. Yet for all the ways that we might improve Europe's defence capabilities by spending more, we shall spend scarce assets on duplicating what NATO and the United States already possess and what is already available to European members of NATO under the Berlin arrangements. Therefore, it makes sense only if we spend more than it costs to cover the duplication.

Can the Secretary of State name a single European member of NATO who is planning to spend more on defence? The answer is that nobody is. We will not spend more on defence. They may be wrong, but all the political pressures are in the other direction. Everybody wants money released from defence spending because of the end of the cold war.

If we set up these parallel arrangements without spending much more money, we risk the worst of all worlds: a continuing militarily weak Europe and undermining the United States' commitment to NATO. It could be argued that we could do without the United States' commitment to NATO if we were prepared to build up a serious military force in Europe, but it cannot be argued that we can do without that commitment, unless we are prepared to build up that force. We have reached a dangerous halfway stage in this: we are undermining the American commitment to NATO and we are not building up the necessary military forces ourselves. That is a high price to pay.

At the very least, we deserve an explanation for this change of policy, which we have not had. There has been substantial bipartisan consensus on these matters since the end of the cold war and since the Labour party dropped its anti-American, CND defence policy a few years ago. Yet the Government have sacrificed that. Not only that, but they have sacrificed Britain's true interests and the transatlantic link, which is vital to our security, and they have risked undermining NATO, which has been the foundation of that security for 50 years. For what? Some transitory and illusory, weekend goodwill within the European Union.

2.33 pm

Ms Gisela Stuart (Birmingham, Edgbaston): First, I apologise that I cannot stay for the winding-up speeches because I will have to return to Birmingham to vote in the European elections. That brings me to a point made by the hon. Member for Stratford-on-Avon (Mr. Maples). He said that today was an inappropriate day to choose for a debate on defence in the world, but I think that today is most appropriate because it is important to recognise that what has been happening in Europe is significant to post-world war 2 peace.

Today is the day after last night's announcement on Kosovo and the Secretary of State has just given us the latest announcement, both of which are significant. Today, we should recognise what the part that we have played in Europe has done for peace within the framework of defence.

One of my most moving experiences since I became a Member of Parliament came a few weeks ago, when I was privileged to be with the Prime Minister in Aachen when he received the Charlemagne prize. French Prime Minister Jospin gave the recommendation speech and a British Prime Minister received a significant European prize in recognition of his work on European unity and maintaining peace. It was an extremely proud moment for someone like me, who has a somewhat international background. I like to think of myself in some way as a representation of how far Europe has moved, not least because I was born near Munich and have ended up inheriting Neville Chamberlain's seat by purely democratic means. Much has been achieved by democratic, peaceful means, and through Britain's role in Europe complementing NATO, not being apart from it.

Dr. Julian Lewis: Is not the lesson to be learned from the hon. Lady's inheriting Neville Chamberlain's seat not that Europe moved in a particular direction, but that Germany became a democracy? Germany became a democracy because British democracy defeated German militarism. To put that down to Europe rather than to a victory in a war and the maintenance of an alliance in peace is misleading and unworthy of the debate.

Ms Stuart: I regret having given way. I remind the hon. Gentleman that it was the British people of Edgbaston who elected me. It had nothing to do with the German Government.

The defence debate is not about hardware. Sometimes, there is a danger that it is about boys talking about toys. We have defence to protect people. It is no good pulling faces and saying that this is some unworthy debate. Defence is about people. We have defence to protect people.

Kosovo reminded my generation, the post-war generation, that war is essentially bloody. It came as a shock to realise that, in the heart of Europe, we could still

[Ms Stuart]

have the kind of ethnic cleansing that we thought belonged to a different age and certainly to different parts of the world. Yet it was happening right under our noses. The most distressing aspect was how we responded to it. It took quite some time before the forces pulled together. It is thanks in no small way to British leadership that we have reached the point that we have today.

Let me return quickly to my experience in Aachen. The Prime Minister gave a speech about military action in Kosovo. Some of my German and French colleagues said that no French Prime Minister or German Chancellor would have dared to make that speech. That kind of leadership and determination to keep Europe united in one force is easily underestimated here in London, where we do not realise what the Prime Minister and the British forces have achieved.

I wish to draw the attention of the House to the mainland European experience of being a refugee—something that we tend to forget in this country. Britain has not been invaded for a thousand years. We read about, and see pictures of, Kosovo and people—a whole generation—being displaced in former Yugoslavia. In a country such as Germany, virtually every family will have first-hand experience of, or—as I did—will have grown up with, stories about what it is like to be told that one has three hours to leave with only one suitcase. My generation may have been brought up, as the hon. Member for Stratford-on-Avon rather glibly said, in the post-war CND era. Yes, we oppose war, but we also realise that there is a place for it, and an appropriate place for it when it comes to protecting people. We are in the heart of Europe and we must play our part there constructively.

It is difficult to understand why Europe has easily accepted economic and industrial leadership—Britain is the fifth largest economy in the world—when there is reluctance to accept similar leadership for defence. In some ways, we continue to behave like dependants on the United States, when it is a partner. The hon. Gentleman rightly said that Kosovo has shown that we need the States. My conclusion from that is not that we should not go on developing European defence strategies, but that there is even more reason to develop them because we should be able to deal with any future Kosovos.

The Prime Minister's initiative in Portschach signalled the Government's determination to move in that direction. The Franco-British declaration in St. Malo took the initiative further. To say that Britain goes into these negotiations simply signing what the French and Germans dictate to them is either an extraordinary failure to understand what is going on or deliberate mischief making.

Mr. David Heath: Both.

Ms Stuart: Indeed.

Britain's leadership and political determination are unrivalled in the European context and are supported by the professionalism of British troops. Some 8,000 British troops stand ready to be part of the peace agreement—the largest contingent of any nation. British forces have led the way in Bosnia in ensuring that war criminals are brought to justice.

Our peacekeeping commitment is easily forgotten in talking about defence. However, defence is not just about the narrow window of warfare but about what happens afterwards, which can be more important than the immediate engagement. Britain has been leading that work. Later this year, Britain will become the first permanent member of the United Nations Security Council to sign an agreement with the United Nations to make more of our forces available for UN peace support operations.

The United Kingdom's approach has primarily involved finding practical ways to improve political and military capabilities. Our military capabilities would be inconsequential without the political framework to support them. There have been institutional changes to help us achieve that. The Secretary of State mentioned the need to take political control of military decisions. I am sure that other hon. Members will mention military hardware, but we should always remember that hardware is a means to an end, not an end in itself. Merely possessing weapons or talking about the percentage of gross domestic product spent on defence tells us little about defence, which is about protecting people and maintaining peace.

On the international co-operation required to deal with refugees, Britain has again taken the lead. The aim is to return people to their homes. It is no good throwing refugees out and dispersing them all over Europe. The aim should be what Britain has done in Kosovo by supporting the United Nations and enabling all the displaced people to return to their homes. It is also about facilitating restructuring. The post-war period and the early development of the European Community teaches us that economic reconstruction provides long-term peace.

We need to develop our European structures not in duplication of, or competition with, those of NATO but as a complement to them. Within that, participating Governments will and must retain their sovereign authority to commit or withhold their troops. To talk about a European defence strategy is not to cede sovereignty but to recognise common interests.

I commend what the Labour Government are doing on preventing conflict and arms control. We have elevated defence diplomacy and conflict prevention to one of the seven core missions of our armed forces, which underpin all our defence planning. The prevention of conflict is as vital a part of defence policy as the strategy for responding to it.

It is easy to forget the impetus that we have given to international arms control. Not only have we banned the import, export, manufacture and transfer of anti-personnel land mines in line with our manifesto commitment, we have extended the ban to cover their operational use. No British soldier on operations will ever again lay an anti-personnel land mine. That has gone hand in hand with strengthening our forces, not least by enabling them to respond quickly to any conflict as it develops.

The hon. Member for Aldershot (Mr. Howarth), who is not in his place, accused the Secretary of State of wishing to lead Europe but not willing the means. Again, he fails to understand what has been happening in the past two years. I fundamentally disagree with his assumption. The fact is that Britain and the Prime Minister have given leadership to Europe. The professionalism of British troops, the Prime Minister's leadership during the

Kosovan conflict and the way in which he carried his European partners cannot be over stressed. It is no good saying that that did not happen, because it did. France and Germany followed the lead given by the Prime Minister. No other European leader could have given that lead so successfully. I am not complacent, but we can be proud of that leadership.

I conclude with a reminder. If I have one sadness, it is that we have ended the millennium with the ethnic cleansing and conflict in Kosovo. I hope that my children will have the privilege that I have had, of which my mother, a victim of ethnic cleansing after world war 2, forcefully reminded me when I once made a derogatory remark about armed forces. She told me that I had had the privilege of never having had to wait on whether the Russian or American armed forces arrived first. My life had never depended on waiting for the armed forces, and I hope that those of my children will not do so. In the meantime, we have the responsibility of maintaining our armed forces within a European defence framework that complements, and works with, NATO, not one that thinks that Britain can, on its own without such co-operation, attain what we have achieved so far.

2.47 pm

Mr. David Atkinson (Bournemouth, East): I shall confine my remarks to the missile defence of Europe. My qualification for doing so is as the rapporteur on transatlantic co-operation on ballistic missile defence for the Western European Union Assembly, which unanimously adopted my second report on the subject during its December 1997 part-session. Both my reports warned that Europe was defenceless against ballistic missile attacks. That remains true.

Since then, we have had the outcome of the Government's strategic defence review. To echo the Secretary of State, it concluded that the risk to Britain from ballistic missiles of nations of concern was many years off, that we should continue to monitor the position and that we should remain in close touch with our allies. I find that complacent and alarming. As I shall explain, it contradicts the policy now adopted by the American Congress through its Missile Defence Act, which President Clinton is expected to sign into law soon.

We in western Europe have every reason to be sensitive to the need for missile defence. There has been a missile threat to Europe ever since the first cruise missile, the V1, and the first ballistic missile, the V2, were developed more than 50 years ago. In all, more than 4,300 V2s were fired and they had a disproportionate political, economic and psychological effect because of the helplessness of our air defences.

Today, such missile technology is more easily obtained than ever and has been used many times in recent years. We in Britain will never forget that two of our ships were sunk by Exocets during the Falklands war. In 1986, Italy was shaken by a Libyan missile that struck the island of Lampedusa. Beyond Europe, during one phase of the Iran-Iraq war, Iraq rained missiles on Teheran and other cities. During the Gulf war, Saddam Hussein used his strongest card to attack Israeli towns and an American base in Saudi Arabia with Scud missiles.

In March 1997, China fired four ballistic missiles into the sea near Taiwan during its presidential elections. That did not intimidate the voters, but it caused Lloyd's of London to refuse to insure any ship going to Taiwan, which damaged its economy and that of Japan. Last year, a North Korean Taepo-Dong 1 missile overflew Japan. Today, India and Pakistan are proliferating their missile capabilities, with warheads to match.

Those are recent events which we should not ignore. Missiles have been used to destroy, to threaten and to intimidate. They can affect whole economies and impact on foreign policies. Today, a growing number of third world Governments are buying or developing missiles. Such missiles are easier to man and cheaper to acquire than squadrons of fighter aircraft.

According to Lancaster university, 35 non-NATO countries have ballistic missiles, 18 of which are capable of installing nuclear, biological, chemical or radiological warheads on them. Lancaster university also estimates that 67 non-NATO countries possess cruise missiles. So any future western rapid reaction force in an out-of-area operation now needs far greater protection than was provided during Desert Storm.

Two years ago, as the new Labour Government embarked upon their defence review, it had long been appreciated that the greatest potential menace were the five rogue regimes, some of which have helped each other's missile programmes—Iran, Iraq, Libya, Syria and North Korea. Fired from Libya, North Korean No-Dong missiles with a range of 700 miles would threaten southern Europe, while its Taepo-Dong two-stage rockets, which it is developing, would threaten all the capitals of Europe. Despite all this, the Government's strategic defence review concluded that the risks to Britain from ballistic missiles were many years off.

Since that conclusion was reached, the American Congress has responded to three reports. The Rumsfield commission report last year said that the USA and Europe could be facing a substantial threat by 2010, an assessment which some believe has already been overtaken by recent missile developments in the third world. This year's national intelligence estimate of the CIA concludes that any country, regardless of its missile development experience, could field an intercontinental ballistic missile by 2015. Two weeks ago, the bipartisan committee chaired by Congressman Cox reported that China had spent the past 40 years stealing from the United States nuclear technology which it has spread to unstable regimes around the world, including those close enough to attack Britain and Europe with ballistic missiles.

It was in anticipation of the Cox report that the Clinton Administration withdrew its opposition to a Bill to build a missile defence shield against nuclear attack. It received an overwhelming 67:3 majority in the Senate, and a 3:1 vote in the House of Representatives. So, if the United States now plans to defend itself in this way, why not Europe, and why not the United Kingdom?

When the WEU Assembly debated my report on 3 December 1997, we expressed concern at the rate at which the threat to Europe appears to be accelerating and the length of time that it would take to develop an effective ballistic missile defence shield. We noted that there had been no progress whatever in developing European early warning and anti-missile defence systems. We passed unanimously recommendation 621, which urged our Council of Ministers to pursue with far greater urgency the development of a common anti-ballistic missile defence system, and European Governments to

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provide the budget necessary; to carry out a specifically European study of the architecture of anti-missile defence systems foreseeable in the short, medium and long term for the coverage of the continent; and to examine the possibility of co-operation with Russia over anti-missile defence.

In its reply, the Council noted that European nations were participating actively in NATO studies on extended air defence and to develop plans for theatre ballistic missile defence. That was presumably a reference to the new NATO air command and central systems which, in principle, will give Europe an initial capability to defend itself against ballistic missile attack. However, in practice, according to *Jane's Defence Weekly* of 28 April this year, there are no cohesive efforts under way to develop anti-missile defence for Europe.

In Europe today—unlike in the American Congress—there is no sense of urgency to respond to an accelerating threat, and about the time that it would take to respond to that threat. That complacency is now contrary to the new approach adopted by the United States. In the light of that, I urge the Government to review their review on missile defence. I hope that the Minister of State will respond to those concerns in his reply, and assure the House that the ballistic missile defence of Europe will be in place before new threats emerge.

2.56 pm

Mr. Harry Cohen (Leyton and Wanstead): The Select Committee on Defence, of which I am a member, recently published its report on the future of NATO. There is an important case for reform of NATO. It has been somewhat overshadowed by the situation in Kosovo, but we must come back to it, especially in relation to nuclear weapons, and this debate is a good opportunity to do so.

I successfully pressed for a number of amendments to the report, which I shall run through briefly for the House. One of them called for an improvement in NATO's links with humanitarian aid agencies and for them to work together in peace support operations. Following events in Kosovo, that is now very relevant. My amendments also called for NATO member states properly to respect human rights in their own countries, and to maintain stable democracies and civilian control over their militaries.

The amended report urged restraint on NATO's out-of-area operations where there was no direct threat to NATO's interests; called on NATO to respect United Nations philosophy and ensure that any operation that it undertook was legitimate under international law; called for a strengthening of the role of the Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe to allow it to play a fuller part in crisis prevention and management as well as post-conflict reconciliation; contained a welcome for the French formally to re-enter NATO's integrated military system whenever they felt prepared to do so; and called for a strengthening of security co-operation between Russia and NATO, including the European countries of NATO, so that Russia was co-opted into collective security rather than adopting a narrow nationalism. The report made many recommendations in relation to Russia, such as that Russia should help its former military officers to set up small businesses. It expressed concern about anti-semitism in Russia.

I also successfully made amendments to the report concerning nuclear weapons—an issue on which I wish to concentrate most of my speech. The report called for early unconditional ratification by Russia of the START 2 nuclear disarmament treaty and rapid commencement of negotiations on a START 3 treaty between Russia, the United States and other NATO countries with nuclear weapons.

We pay tribute to Ukraine for abandoning its nuclear weapons and call for support for it in dealing with the problems of Chernobyl. We call for a new mission even-handedly to promote non-proliferation of weapons of mass destruction and counter-proliferation objectives. We call for restraint to avoid a new path of nuclearisation. We warn that that could happen if the United States decided to contravene the anti-ballistic missile treaty. That warning relates directly to what the hon. Member for Bournemouth, East (Mr. Atkinson) has just said. We would be on a most dangerous path to nuclear proliferation if we went for a so-called ballistic defence approach, which would only increase the pace of a new nuclear arms race. We must, therefore, restrain ourselves—as, it is to be hoped, will the United States—from breaking the existing treaty.

I also ensured that the report gave a proper explanation of the rationale for a policy of no first use of nuclear weapons. Ambassador Thomas Graham, the leader of the US delegation to the non-proliferation treaty talks four years ago, put that rationale to the Committee. He said that the world urgently needs to lower the political importance of nuclear weapons and that only the nuclear powers could do that. A first-use policy increases the perceived political importance of nuclear weapons and encourages nuclear proliferation.

Such a political approach is important in states other than those which already hold nuclear weapons, because they might develop nuclear weapons for the same reasons that we developed them. For example, India and Pakistan already give the same reasons as us for having adopted those weapons. That logic could apply to other countries.

In his evidence to the Committee, the Secretary of State referred to the new definition of deterrence when he said that uncertainty equals stability. That seems to be the new creed. However, it encourages proliferation in other states not only of nuclear weapons but of other weapons of mass destruction. Those states could claim that such weapons create uncertainty and, therefore, stability. That is not a good creed.

Ambassador Graham made a further point in relation to the argument about the political importance of nuclear weapons. He said that, at present, Russia puts a heavy emphasis on the first use of nuclear weapons, especially as its conventional forces have withered. We need to move the Russians away from that policy, but they will not even begin to move while we maintain the first-use approach. Ambassador Graham pointed out that nuclear weapons do not offer a proportional response to a non-nuclear attack—for example, one using biological or chemical weapons. Those are weapons of mass destruction, but such destruction would be significantly less than if nuclear weapons were used. The ambassador noted that, under international law, there is a doctrine of belligerent response and that international commitments are waived once there have been such attacks. His view was that a first-use policy is unnecessary and counter-productive.

At the Select Committee meeting on 17 February, I put that view to the Secretary of State, who responded with two arguments. First, he said that nuclear weapons

"are essentially political weapons that are to be used only in the case of last resort; to be used only in the case of national survival."

Secondly, he said that a no-first-use policy could lead the other side

"to take actions in a conventional sense or in an asymmetric sense, (in a chemical or biological context), which would allow them to take risks knowing that there was to be no penalty for doing that."

Those are crucial arguments.

I have already pointed out that such approaches apply to other countries as well and are a driver for proliferation. First use cannot be regarded as a last resort, nor is it a matter of national survival. As Ambassador Graham said, it is not a proportional response—even to chemical or biological weapons. However deadly those weapons may be, they do not threaten national survival. In any case, they are covered by the belligerent-response provision in the international arrangements. If we take the approach of getting in first, that is immensely dangerous; it is the attitude of a Dr. Strangelove.

There seems to be a fear of a massive first strike, but that would be phenomenally risky, whoever undertook it—whether or not there was a first-use policy. Theoretically, it could happen in either case. Getting in first is more likely if there are huge arsenals of nuclear weapons, mistrust and first-use policies on both sides. A no-first-use policy would make that less likely, because it would put pressure on other countries, such as Russia, to agree to the same policy.

In relation to the Secretary of State's point that countries could use asymmetrical weapons—chemical and biological weapons—without penalty, there is indeed a penalty. We have only to consider Iraq to see that there is an enormous penalty for that country's flirtation with chemical weapons. Iraq is suffering a phenomenally heavy penalty and that fact will not be lost on other countries. The belligerent-response doctrine also applies in that case. A no-first-use policy would help to ensure that everyone signed up to internationally agreed treaties on chemical and biological weapons, with proper inspection. As Ambassador Graham pointed out, first-use policies make that much harder to achieve. We need to lessen the political importance of nuclear weapons, but the UK Government and other NATO Governments appear to have no strategy for doing so.

In its response to the strategic defence review report, the Select Committee noted:

"We regret that there has been no restatement of nuclear policy since the speech of the then Secretary of State in 1993; the SDR does not provide a new statement of the government's nuclear deterrent posture in the present strategic situation within which the sub-strategic role of Trident could be clarified. We recommend the clarification of both the UK's strategic and sub-strategic nuclear policy."

The Government's response to the Select Committee on 19 May was the same, word for word, as that given by NATO in its press communiqué, "The Alliance's Strategic Concept", NAC-S(99)65; clearly, it must have been written by British civil servants at the Ministry of Defence. The communiqué stated:

"The fundamental purpose of the nuclear forces of the Allies is political: to preserve peace and prevent coercion and any kind of war."

It continued:

"They demonstrate that aggression of any kind is not a rational option."

That was said at the Washington summit—presumably thanks to those British civil servants. Well, tell that to the Serbs; nuclear weapons certainly did not put them off aggression. That shows how poorly thought-out is our whole current approach to nuclear weapons.

We received an assurance from the Secretary of State that he would consider the meaning of that sub-strategic role. It means lowering the threshold—that nuclear weapons might be used. However, the Secretary of State came up with an answer:

"The purpose of our nuclear forces is to deter aggression against the United Kingdom or its Allies. The Strategic Defence Review confirmed that, in addition to its strategic deterrent role, Trident would also perform the sub-strategic nuclear role, formerly assigned to RAF Tornado aircraft. A sub-strategic element is an essential component of a nuclear deterrent policy. In extreme circumstances of self defence, a capability for the more limited use of nuclear weapons would allow us to signal to an aggressor that he has miscalculated our resolve, without using the full destructive power that Trident offers.—[*Official Report*, 26 March 1999; Vol. 328, c. *433*.]

What a strategy that is—one in which there can somehow be light use of nuclear weapons. That seems to be a contradiction. That strategy—the sub-strategic use of nuclear weapons—is to be used against another nuclear weapons state. Let us turn it around: if someone dropped light sub-strategic nuclear weapons for us for the same reason—to deter us from aggression—what would our response be? Would we accept it, or would a nuclear exchange be likely? That shows how ill-thought-out the policy is. Even if the circumstances are truly extreme, why not have a no-first-use policy? We cannot use nuclear weapons sub-strategically as the Government pretend. For example, can India and Pakistan use nuclear weapons sub-strategically?

Dr. Julian Lewis: I acknowledge the hon. Gentleman's long and consistent commitment to unilateral nuclear disarmament by this country, but let me give an example that shows that matters are not as simple as he thinks. Imagine two nuclear powers, one of which has the capability only to retaliate using large strategic nuclear weapons against cities, and the other the capability to initiate a much more precise and accurate attack against troop and military formations. Does the hon. Gentleman accept that, unless the systems are balanced, there is a danger that one of those nuclear powers might think, wrongly, that it could attack troop concentrations with impunity, because the other side would not retaliate in the only way that it could, against cities, and thus risk losing cities in return? The situation is not as simple as he suggests.

Mr. Cohen: The hon. Gentleman has got it wrong. The lesson of Kosovo is that a response is more likely if troops suffer, so nuclear exchange is more, not less, likely if we start to nuke troops. The hon. Gentleman's argument seems to be in favour of bombing a non-city area. Where is his constituency? It is not in London, is it?

Dr. Lewis: New Forest, East.

Mr. Cohen: Exactly. If the Russians bombed the New Forest as a sub-strategic warning, what does the hon. Gentleman think the Government's response should be? That shows the nonsense of his argument.

[Mr. Cohen]

I refer the House to a parliamentary briefing from the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament, which makes a series of points about disarmament negotiations: basically, such negotiations are all stuck. The briefing refers to the conference on disarmament in Geneva, the CD. It states:

"After almost four months of negotiation the CD has still failed to agree a work programme for its current session and, as a result, has failed to begin negotiation of a Fissile Material Treaty (FMT) i.e. a treaty that would ban the production and use of the two crucial nuclear explosives—plutonium and highly enriched uranium—that make up nuclear weapons."

The Government say they are in favour of a fissile material treaty, but negotiations are being blocked in Geneva.

The briefing goes on to talk about five proposals:

"The South African proposal for an Ad-Hoc Committee to 'deliberate upon practical steps for systematic and progressive efforts to eliminate nuclear weapons as well as to identify if and when one or more such steps should be the subject of negotiations in the conference'.

The Egyptian proposal to 'commence negotiations on a phased programme of nuclear disarmament with the objective of the complete elimination of nuclear weapons.'

The Belgian proposal (supported by Germany, Italy, Netherlands and Norway) to establish an Ad-Hoc Working Group to 'study ways and means of establishing an exchange of information and views within the Conference on endeavours towards nuclear disarmament'.

The Canadian proposal to establish an Ad-Hoc Committee for 'the substantive discussion of nuclear disarmament issues with a view to identifying if and when one or more such issues might be negotiated multilaterally'.

The G-21 proposal (proposed on their behalf by Cuba) for an Ad-Hoc Committee on Nuclear Disarmament to 'start negotiations on a phased programme for the complete elimination of nuclear weapons within a specified framework of time, including a nuclear weapon convention'."

None of those proposals meets with the favour of the Governments of the UK, the United States and France, who have suggested merely that:

"the President of the CD consults 'on ways and means of establishing an exchange of information and views . . . by holding informal, open-ended consultations . . . by consulting with delegations'"

and other such means. Presumably, all that can be done at any time. There is no practical programme of action, nor even a programme for a programme of action. That follows two years in which nothing was achieved except agreement that negotiations could begin in 1999 on a fissile material treaty.

CND states:

"The CD has negotiated all the major multilateral international arms control agreements to date and is the only UN body that has a mandate to negotiate and agree such agreements. If it cannot agree a means to begin the process of ridding the world of nuclear weapons then no one can."

The CND report concludes:

"without a fully implemented Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty, without an FMT, with the CD in deadlock and the nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty lacking any future direction, no hope of START II ever being ratified and no prospect of START III being agreed and NATO re-emphasising the importance of NATO retaining nuclear weapons as an essential part of their military structure, one has to conclude that there is no hope whatsoever currently of achieving a world free of nuclear weapons.

Whatever window of opportunity existed upon the end of the Cold War has now firmly been slammed shut and the deadlocks and bars been put in place."

The UK Government in their strategic defence review report, and NATO in its Washington press release on the deliberations on its strategic concept, shirk the issues of nuclear weapons reduction and seriously attempting to stop nuclear proliferation. That do-nothing approach does not mean that the status quo will last for ever. Instead, proliferation drives us down the road of shirking action—for example, when India, Pakistan and other countries develop nuclear weapons—and of increasing military intervention, albeit only when it suits us. That makes for a far more dangerous world. Defence in the world is not helped by the current nuclear weapons policy. The Government must return to the subject seriously and with a will.

3.17 pm

Mr. Mike Hancock (Portsmouth, South): I am sorry to be unable to apologise to the Secretary of State in person for not having been here for the beginning of his speech. I was detained representing Parliament on the political committee of the Western European Union in Paris, in which we discussed many of the matters that have been raised this afternoon. I would have apologised to the hon. Member for Stratford-on-Avon (Mr. Maples) if I had missed his speech as well, but I was fortunate enough—if that is the right expression—to be present to hear it.

It is disappointing that today—European election day—has been chosen for the debate. To hold those elections today was not a sudden impulse—we have known for some years when they were coming—yet the debate was scheduled on 24 March, despite there being time and flexibility enough in our timetable to have it on another day. For it to be held on a day when so many Members are distracted with other matters is a great disappointment to the House and to Members unfortunate enough to be unable to attend. I am sure that there will be no repetition in future and that lessons have been learned.

The debate gives us an opportunity to discuss many matters, but hon. Members who have already referred to Kosovo will not blame me for expressing my thoughts on that subject as well. The Secretary of State brought us the good news which will be universally welcomed, that the Secretary-General of NATO has ordered that bombing should stop. I hope that it is the first of many steps to establish a lasting peace, but achieving that end will probably involve a campaign far more difficult than the 10-week air war carried out over the former Yugoslavia. Nevertheless, we should give a big vote of thanks to the men and women of our armed forces who have done so much, both in the air and on the ground, to bring about what has so far been achieved. We should not forget the enormous commitment of our service men and women to alleviating the plight of refugees in Macedonia, Albania and elsewhere in the region.

I also offer my compliments—I am sorry that Conservative Members do not feel able to do likewise—to the Prime Minister, the Foreign Secretary and the Secretary of State for Defence. *[Interruption.]* I understand that Opposition Members congratulated them last night, but I think it is nice to thank them again today. They have played an important role in showing the determination and leadership that was sorely lacking in some aspects of the run-up to the campaign against Serbia.

We can learn many lessons from this action, not least regarding the lack of military intelligence before and during the campaign.

It appears that few people had any informed knowledge about the reaction of, first, the Serbians and, secondly, Milosevic. No one seemed to grasp his difficult personality and the likely outcome of a bombing campaign against him. We slipped up badly in that area. I am sure that committees throughout NATO and the Parliaments of countries involved in the campaign will be quick to seize the opportunity to learn those lessons and take steps to clarify those matters for the future.

I believe the Prime Minister had to play a leadership role because, on this occasion, the White House showed, at best, slow leadership and, at worst, no leadership. Someone had to give the people of Kosovo and the surrounding area some confidence that there would be an effective response. It was clear to many of us that we had delayed intervention to the point where people would suffer needlessly. I am sure that the failure to provide proper leadership was instrumental in prolonging the air war—and many people suffered as a consequence. I hope that we have learned that strong, firm and determined leadership is necessary. We must give confidence to those men and women whose lives are put on the line by the actions of politicians.

As hon. Members have said, we have won the air war in Kosovo. However, I hope that we are prepared for the real job of winning the peace. We were not prepared for an air war of 10 weeks' duration; I do not believe that anyone in the Ministry of Defence or NATO genuinely believed that it would take that long. I hope that winning the peace will not involve short-term solutions. People should not believe that peace will be won quickly. We must learn some real lessons from the situation in Bosnia. Those who have visited Bosnia recently will be aware of the fragility of that nation. The fabric of Bosnian society would collapse quickly if the troops were withdrawn. The only thing holding that country together is the international community's commitment to keeping troops on the ground.

Mr. Dalyell: Having stayed with his national service regiment in Bosnia for three days last year, does the hon. Gentleman agree that the idea of leaving that country without full military capacity is unthinkable? It is one thing to commit troops, but a completely different matter to pull them out. I did not support the commitment of troops to Bosnia in the first place, but for the life of me I do not see how, morally, we can pull out in the foreseeable future—by which I mean in my lifetime.

Mr. Hancock: Sadly, I think the hon. Gentleman is absolutely right: I cannot conceive of a situation in which it would be either easy or desirable to pull troops out of Bosnia. That outcome could be considered only if some firm democratic framework were established that would give that country's democratic processes some depth. There is no evidence that that is happening: the three communities in Bosnia are as divided today as they were when the fighting stopped. We have the ability to hold the peace in Bosnia and, unfortunately, we will have to repeat that exercise in Kosovo.

Mr. Robert Key (Salisbury): I am slightly mystified by the hon. Gentleman's comments. How does he explain the fact that the Muslim and Christian communities in Bosnia lived together fairly peacefully for some 300 years until Mr. Milosevic turned up? Does the hon. Gentleman think Mr. Milosevic has had no impact on the situation in the past decade? Did he not start the trouble—and learn the error of his ways only recently?

Mr. Hancock: No one dissents from that point of view, but realistically, nobody else is in a position to finish what Milosevic has started. It will take more than a generation to rebuild and bring the communities together. We are mistaken to believe that the mischief perpetrated is the work of a one-man band. There is no evidence to suggest that Milosevic's removal will not be followed by the arrival of Milosevic mark 2. I would like to see the abundant evidence—some hon. Members seem to think it exists—that points to the conclusion that the removal of Milosevic will bring enlightenment to Serbia and peace to the entire region. I doubt it.

Real pain and suffering will continue to be experienced by the next generation to be born and raised in that region. Sadly, Milosevic's legacy will extend well into the next millennium. The 300 years of peace and harmony to which the hon. Member for Salisbury (Mr. Key) referred have been torn apart by less than a decade of mischief and evil. We have paid a high price for the tolerance that we—among others—showed to the Milosevic regime over the past 10 years. As a community, we should have taken a firmer hand with Milosevic over Croatia and Slovenia.

We owe a debt of gratitude to those in the region who have stood by us. We must help to rebuild and stabilise the shaky fabric of democracy in Macedonia. If we fail to do so, we may have a real problem on our hands. I do not believe the KLA will be an easy force to reckon with. I share the view expressed by others in this House and elsewhere in Europe that, if there is a real attempt to disarm the KLA, that force will fight United Nations soldiers. That is a real possibility. I do not believe that it will be easy to disarm, with Tornados and Harriers, KLA troops holding Kalashnikovs. The troops on the ground will have to remove those weapons physically.

The KLA soldiers will not go home quietly—I have said that in the House before. I met three different KLA groups on three separate occasions and I am far from convinced that the KLA's ambitions are aimed at a free and autonomous Kosovo. Many of the KLA soldiers to whom I spoke came not from Kosovo but from Albania and are fighting for a greater Albania—which includes the whole of Kosovo, Albania, Macedonia and part of Montenegro. They will not settle for second best: they are armed and they are on a roll. It will be enormously difficult to contain the aspirations of the KLA.

It will also be difficult to handle the payback issue in Kosovo. We cannot ignore that fact. I do not envy those men and women in the British and United Nations forces whose task it will be to police Kosovo. That is a thankless job that will continue for 10 years or more. Just look at our experiences in Cyprus: 25 years later, United Nations garrisons are still keeping the communities apart.

Mr. Bob Russell (Colchester): Does my hon. Friend agree that the short-term solution in Bosnia has already become a long-term solution? The overstretch of British

[Mr. Bob Russell]

troops is such that the European Community needs to devote more resources to supporting operations in Bosnia and in Kosovo.

Mr. Hancock: I agree. This morning, I attended a meeting in Paris of the political committee of the Western European Union at which members from Italy and France suggested that it would take 2 per cent. of the gross domestic product of all the NATO countries to rebuild Kosovo and Serbia and to restore what we have knocked down in Montenegro. Does anyone believe that such expense would be an easy proposition to make to this House, let alone other Parliaments in Europe? It is reckoned that such a commitment will be necessary not only to keep the peace but to rebuild those areas so that people can go back to them. We shall realise the extent of the damage only when our troops have gone in.

We must consider past experience. Sadly, there are refugees who have spent over 40 years in camps in Palestine. Cyprus has been divided for 25 years, and there is still a huge UN commitment to the island. We need to learn lessons from that, and we must try to build communities and bring them together.

That brings me to the role of the WEU and the Council of Europe. If ever there were a missed opportunity for two organisations to take action, it was the situation in Kosovo over the past 12 months. If the Council of Europe and the WEU had been able to work together, perhaps with NATO's support, and had got to grips with some of the issues, we might not have the result that we have today. Certainly, there must be a role for those organisations in the future, and they need to find that role.

We must consider the small-scale experience of the Multinational Advisory Police Element, made up of the police forces of 21 countries, which is currently operating in Albania and is about to be expanded. That police force is making a determined effort, against all the odds, to bring some semblance of order to the Albanian police force. The task is difficult and, some might say, bizarre, considering the sad state of some of the Albanian police force and its practices in the past.

I have a constituent who has a distinguished war record and was highly decorated for his services in Yugoslavia. I refer to Sir Alfred Blake, former Lord Mayor of Portsmouth and a marine commander, who, for a sizeable chunk of the second world war, fought with Tito and his partisans. He explained to me the difficult and complex nature of the region's people—not only the Serbs, but others—the difficult terrain, the problems of trying to get people to work together and the fragile nature of the operation. Why did not, or could not, our military intelligence—I refer not only to the UK, but to NATO—give us better information about targets and the personalities that we had to deal with?

When we consider what is happening to our defence expenditure, we notice that significant changes and slippages are already occurring. Coming from Portsmouth as I do, I have asked a number of questions about the Royal Navy. It is interesting that there has already been a slow but determined effort to retard or cancel scheme after scheme. That is obviously a disappointment. When one considers those schemes individually, one might think that there are good reasons for cancelling them, but when one considers them collectively, one begins to wonder whether a trend is emerging. Developments that were made two years ago are beginning to slip away and some schemes have been dropped altogether. Some schemes for updating ships will be put on hold for such a long time that they will no longer be practical. I hope that the Select Committee on Defence will consider those issues in the near future.

We have an opportunity today to discuss wider defence issues, and there is a significant trend in defence expenditure that leads me to believe that all three arms of our armed forces are experiencing a drop-back in procurement. Despite the best efforts of Ministers and the assurances made in the House by the Secretary of State, the Minister for the Armed Forces and the Under-Secretary, we are not yet doing enough to retain and recruit the service men and women that we desperately need.pa We have a number of continuing commitments. The Secretary of State rightly referred in his speech to some of the on-going roles fulfilled by our service men and women. We should not forget that we still have a significant garrison in the Falklands which requires a considerable sum from our defence budget. I am glad, however, that we now have a more realistic approach to the islands' south American neighbours. I hope that we are learning that greater friendliness and co-operation will, in the long term, lead to a better future for the people in the Falkland Islands and, possibly, faster progress in reducing our defence commitment to the islands.

Gibraltar has, once again, proved that it is a vital part of our defence interests. It has played a role on two or three occasions in the past couple of years. We need to continue to make a strong stand against our colleagues in Spain to ensure that they do not put undue pressure on Gibraltar. We must continue to assure the people of Gibraltar that we support their view.

It is clear that we shall continue to use the bases in Cyprus for a long time to come. The two sovereign bases have served this nation well. They are home to several thousand service men and women and their families, and I cannot believe that there could be a rundown of those bases.

In Germany, we have a slightly different problem. The rundown of our forces there has caused problems in my area of Hampshire because men and their families have been returned and are experiencing pressures. I should like the Government to demonstrate greater commitment to making sure that those families' needs are better met than at present. The Secretary of State mentioned the Royal Navy's continuing role in combating drugs in south America and the Caribbean. He was right to congratulate the captain and crew of HMS Marlborough on their work.

Such roles give rise to a number of issues but, like Kosovo and Bosnia, they provoke questions about overstretch and the resulting problems for various elements of our armed forces. The "Partnership for Peace" is excellent, and we need to build on it. It brings together people who are currently outside the NATO family. There is a greater need for our people to work with them, but the simple fact of co-operating with countries such as the Ukraine means that service men will spend time there working with the people on exercises and planning. That, too, puts pressure on their units, and overstretch causes many problems.

The House is somewhat depleted, but I am sure that most hon. Members who are present will want to speak, so I shall try not to delay the House too long. However, I want to address the moral obligations that the Ministry of Defence has on four key issues that have existed for a long time. One has been around for nearly 50 years, and I hope that, when the Under-Secretary replies to the debate, he will at least offer some light at the end of what is a very long tunnel.

The first issue is the way in which we have responded to the problems of our nuclear test veterans. I read with interest recently that the Government will make payments to the Fijian Government so that they can compensate their service men who were involved in those tests. I represent a substantial number of ex-service men who went through those tests. Sadly, their number is being depleted because many have become ill and died. Their claim for justice has still not been answered, and our lack of consideration of that issue is a stain on this country's character.

The second issue, for which many hon. Members have fought long and hard, is the treatment of members of the armed forces and their civilian workers who worked with asbestos. Not a day goes by without an inquest into the death of somebody in Greater Portsmouth being reported in the local newspaper, under headlines such as "Civilian Worker in Her Majesty's Dockyard Dies of Asbestos-Related Illnesses"—illnesses which were contracted mostly when delagging warships in the 1950s and 1960s. Sadly, that issue still has not been addressed. If it was right to give national recognition to miners' claims for illnesses that caused them so much distress, surely it is right to do the same for those in the defence industry.

Thirdly, we must continue pressure on the Government to speed up the resolution of problems concerning the illnesses of Gulf war veterans. Fourthly, the MOD must end, once and for all, the barbaric practice of experimenting on animals, whether by shooting bullets into pigs or putting goats into decompression chambers and increasing the pressure until they die. Most people would think that the MOD could have long done without such practices. I hope that those four points, which are major issues to many people, will be addressed.

I take this opportunity, as I am sure other hon. Members will, to thank the reserve forces for their work. It is still not too late for the MOD to recognise the vital role that they have not only played but will yet have to play in Kosovo for a long time to come. I am sure that there are some—even among the three Ministers—in the MOD who feel a twinge of conscience and are willing to think again on the issue.

Mr. Keith Simpson (Mid-Norfolk): No.

Mr. Hancock: The hon. Gentleman, who is wearing some spectacular House of Commons socks, says that he does not think so. I would be a little more generous. Perhaps he needs to pull his socks up.

Mr. Simpson: Is the hon. Gentleman a candidate?

Mr. Hancock: No; my hon. Friend the Member for Colchester (Mr. Russell) and I are the only two who have not signed up for the campaign trail.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Defence (Mr. John Spellar): There is still time.

Mr. Hancock: Sadly, for me, that time has long passed.

We have armed forces of which the whole nation can be very proud. Their commitment is unquestionable. We should thank them, but more importantly, we should ensure that, in their endeavours, they have not just the full support of this House but leadership in government that convinces them that the Government are on their side. On all occasions when asked, on issues across the world, they have been on our side—the right side.

3.42 pm

Mr. John Healey (Wentworth): I should first apologise to both Front-Bench teams, as election commitments in my constituency may mean that I will be unable to stay for the winding-up speeches.

I cannot avoid paying tribute to the unshakeable determination of my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State and his colleagues in their campaign to force Milosevic to back down and to prevent the Serbian capacity committing atrocities in the region. We have grown used to the chilling phrase "ethnic cleansing", but my fear is that it is a euphemism and that, as Serbian troops pull out and ours go in, evidence will emerge to reinforce our sense of rightness in the campaign over recent months.

Nevertheless, as my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State said, we face a formidable task truly to settle the situation in Kosovo. During business questions, my hon. Friend the Member for Linlithgow (Mr. Dalyell) said that it may take five years to be certain that the military action has achieved its long-term aim. I fear that that may be true, although it is also surely true that the military technical agreement signed last night is a very welcome and important step towards that long-term aim. The signing of that agreement is a major military and political vindication of the action that the Government and NATO have taken in recent months.

I also pay tribute to the soldiers, aircrews and ground crews who have carried out the campaign—some from my constituency and many others from elsewhere in South Yorkshire—as well as to the armed forces and aid agencies that have dealt with so many traumatised refugees in and around the Balkans. Britain, one must remember, has been one of the largest and most active donors in the effort to improve the provision of humanitarian relief for the refugees. The Government's aim of directing the humanitarian effort, in order that the refugees are helped to stay in the region until they are able to return to their homes, is surely right. As a Government, we have committed more than £40 million to that effort, and more will clearly need to be done.

It is obviously right that, if possible, the refugees should remain in the region before returning home, although I welcomed the recent commitment of my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister to beef up the United Kingdom's commitment to take refugees who needed to leave the region. I extend a welcome, as many are in Rotherham, to the first refugees from Kosovo who are due to arrive there next week.

It is clearly right that Kosovo has dominated any discussion on, or attention to, military issues in recent months. To that extent, today's debate is a welcome opportunity to reintroduce some of the wider perspectives that the House must consider. In doing so, British forces could truly be said to be a force for good in the world at present. The British armed forces have a proud tradition of promoting peace and stability; Kosovo is just the latest example of it.

[Mr. John Healey]

In Bosnia, our British forces led the way in trying to bring suspected war criminals to justice. In Iraq several years before, Britain, in concert with the United States, led efforts to contain Saddam Hussein. Royal Air Force pilots of course still protect Iraqi Kurds in northern Iraq. The proud tradition extends beyond the previous decade. For more than 40 years during the cold war, British forces were committed to the defence of Europe, and stationed in Europe to undertake that responsibility.

British armed forces have a vital role to play in promoting peace and stability throughout the world, particularly Europe, as they do in peacekeeping and peace-support operations. As my hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham, Edgbaston (Ms Stuart) pointed out, later this year, Britain is due to sign an agreement with the United Nations to make more of our forces, including all our rapid-reaction troops, available for UN peace-support operations. Should we sign that agreement, we are set to become the first permanent member of the UN Security Council to do so, thereby giving a lead to others.

NATO has obviously played the lead role in Kosovo, but we need to beef up the UN's capacity to play a leading role in future peacekeeping operations, to carry out the so-called Petersberg principles of humanitarian and rescue tasks, peacekeeping, peace-making and, of course, crisis management.

It is fair to say that the new Labour Government have put new emphasis on our armed forces' role in conflict-prevention. That was made tangible by designating one of our armed forces' seven key missions as defence diplomacy and conflict prevention—core missions and responsibilities that underpin defence planning now and in future.

The second way in which the Government have put added emphasis on the role of our armed forces in conflict prevention has been in aiming to realise the aspirations of the commitment of EU states to a common foreign and security policy, on which the hon. Member for Stratford-on-Avon (Mr. Maples) dwelt so long. I remind him that the CFSP originated under the 1992 Maastricht treaty, which was signed by the Government of whom he was a member. That treaty pointed to the eventual framing of a common defence policy, which was given further impetus in 1997 by the Amsterdam treaty, and added impetus more recently in Cologne.

It seems to me that the aim on the European front should be to reinforce the capacity of European states to act together in pursuing foreign policy and security interests. The Secretary of State underlined that in his opening address when he said that he was determined that the European Union should play a full role on the international stage.

The elements that require further development are fairly clear. We need to develop more common policies, more effective decision-making procedures, shared access to military advice, planning and intelligence, and better political control of the strategic direction when we are involved in crisis-management operations. Above all, we need a stronger European defence capability for use within a NATO, a European Union or a UN framework.

The hon. Member for Stratford-on-Avon, whom I welcome back to his seat, said several times that he was concerned about the military resources likely to be required should a common European approach be developed further. It is a startling fact that the European members of NATO collectively now spend two thirds as much as America on defence, yet can only project a small fraction of America's military capability beyond their borders. European taxpayers are much more likely to get better value from their defence budgets if their Governments and armed forces can work more closely together.

It may be common sense to share resources and strengthen co-operation in that way, but it is certainly not straightforward. Recent experience in the Balkans has proved difficult, and has provided a learning experience for many European states concerning the difficulties of pooling efforts to prepare and deploy peace support operations beyond our borders. Thirty European states contribute to SFOR, and an unknown number will contribute to the KFOR operation in the coming months.

I am under no illusions about the fact that the military involvement of European states will be essential in the Balkans, and will continue to be essential for the foreseeable future. I am also under no illusions about the fact that developing a common foreign and security capacity will be complex and protracted, and will involve dealing with some of the difficulties that the hon. Member for Stratford–on–Avon set out. Surely, however, that is the right way to go.

There is also the broader area of personnel matters associated with the future of our armed forces and their operation and deployment in the United Kingdom and overseas. Clearly, the extent of our overseas commitments is placing considerable strain on our armed forces, as I am sure that my hon. Friend the Minister would concede.

In that context, the major recruitment drive that the Government have recently launched across all three services is welcome, as is the emphasis on quality rather than quantity, and the drive to recruit more women and black and other ethnic minority service personnel. As the Secretary of State pointed out, that will lead to an increase of 3,300 personnel in the Army. The extra personnel will be directed to tackling some of the present shortfall in front-line troops.

May I also direct my hon. Friend's attention to early-day motion 585, which has now been signed by 96 Members from both sides of the House, about the International Labour Organisation convention on child soldiers. The Government have been involved this month in the ILO discussions on a new convention that will prohibit the employment of children under 18 in most hazardous forms of labour—and clearly, armed conflict is one of the most hazardous forms of labour that one could imagine.

Although recruiting young soldiers for our armed forces is right, I urge the Minister and his colleagues in the Department to consider seriously the case for not deploying service personnel under 18 in battle zones, thereby supporting the new ILO convention.

I also urge my hon. Friend to give extra emphasis to the new learning forces initiative that has recently been introduced, which offers new opportunities for service personnel to gain accredited qualifications while serving. That will achieve two things. It will help to boost recruitment and retention in the armed forces, but equally, it will help to equip personnel who wish to leave the forces to return to civilian life.

Members of Parliament, especially those who represent areas such as mine with deep-seated high unemployment, will be familiar with the situation of constituents who, having served in our armed forces for five, eight, 10 or even 12 years, return to their home areas ill equipped to take the opportunities that may exist, and unskilled for the sort of civilian jobs available—*[Interruption.]*

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Sir Alan Haselhurst): Order. I am sorry to interrupt the hon. Member for Wentworth (Mr. Healey), but will the hon. Member for Portsmouth, South (Mr. Hancock) contain himself?

Mr. Healey: I welcome a further initiative that the Department has introduced recently—the veterans advice unit. That will act as a single point of contact to which ex-service personnel can turn for advice or information on any matter that they wish.

That is an important step, and will provide a service for ex-service personnel across the board. In that context, may I gently urge my hon. Friend to think about the fact that we should show the same respect and recognition to those who served in the Suez canal zone in the 1950s as we do to those who have served in the Balkans in the 1990s?

3.57 pm

Dr. Julian Lewis (New Forest, East): I shall begin by referring briefly to Kosovo, because, although this is a debate on a wider subject—defence in the world—much reference has been made to Kosovo, and we can use it as a useful starting point from which to draw some wider lessons. The significance of the Kosovo campaign has been that the House has had to consider how to react as a democracy in peacetime to the resurfacing of the sort of barbarism that it had been thought had been finally defeated earlier this century.

The alliances in favour of, and against, taking military action in Kosovo cut across the usual alignments of party politics. Those of us who supported taking military action at an early stage were disappointed that the Government unnecessarily stated, right at the beginning, that there would be no use of ground forces in an opposed environment.

That sent a signal to Milosevic that that was one major threat that he need not fear. It was a mistake by the Government to send that signal, and it was a mistake by my party to endorse it. I know why the signal was sent: it was because we live in an age in which we fight wars in the full glare of media coverage.

We know that, on previous occasions, the military burden has been gigantically greater on this country. Casualties have run into tens of thousands in a given battle, and millions for all participants over the period of a war. Yet that has been accepted because, during those extreme circumstances, draconian methods of censorship, and to a considerable extent self-censorship, apply. We have only to consider the preparations that were made in southern England before the Normandy landings. Areas in the south of the country were closed for access. They were hermetically secured and there was no way in which the normal rights of civilians in towns and villages in southern England were being preserved.

That was a strange paradox for a democracy. A democracy hates to adopt the methods of the dictators whom it is trying to defeat. Yet, if it is to defeat those dictators, it will have to adopt at least some of their methods. Sir Karl Popper summed up this problem in what he called "the paradox of tolerance", which holds that we must tolerate all but the intolerant—because, if we tolerate the intolerant, the conditions for tolerance disappear and the tolerant go with them. In other words, to a considerable extent, we have to fight fire with fire.

I was pleased that the Government gradually withdrew from the unwise commitment that had been given at the outset not to use ground forces, if necessary, to defeat Milosevic. Assuming that everything works out to plan, that the campaign has come to an end at this stage and democracy is restored in the area concerned—it may be many years after all that has happened when we have access to the documentation, the archives, the considerations, and the intelligence appreciations on which the conflict was eventually decided—I believe that we shall discover that two elements, in addition to the proper use of air power in context as part of a campaign, proved to be decisive. Those two elements, as I indicated briefly last night in response to the Secretary of State's statement, were the involvement of the Russians and the covert threat that, after all, ground forces would be deployed if Milosevic did not comply.

It is worth considering what the outcome would have been if there had been no way of obtaining Russian acquiescence in forcing the Serbs to back down. The outcome could have been very different. It is important that we do not draw from this episode the false conclusion that, whenever trouble arises, whenever dirty deeds, murders and ethnic cleansing, for example, face the democracies of Europe in future, we need only send a few score bombers to bomb the offender. I think that that will be proven in time not to have been sufficient by itself.

I have been surprised at the readiness with which commentators such as John Keegan, a distinguished military historian, have been prepared to say, "I was wrong. I said that bombing alone would not work and it has worked." Perhaps some people are better historians than they are contemporary analysts. Let us wait until the John Keegans of the future have access to the archives and the materials on which proper history can be written. I think it will be found that the diplomatic triumph of getting the Russians on side and the killer threat of ground forces being deployed—if necessary—against armed opposition, made Milosevic surrender in the end.

I shall move on from Kosovo. As has been said, the consideration of wider defence problems has been stymied to a considerable degree by the natural tendency to focus upon the crisis in the Balkans. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Stratford-on-Avon (Mr. Maples), the shadow Secretary of State for Defence, on a masterly analysis of the risks that face us with the creation of a European common foreign and security policy and defence arrangements that will cut across the defence arrangements which have served us so well in NATO.

The hon. Member for Birmingham, Edgbaston (Ms Stuart), who is no longer in her place, took pride in the award of the Charlemagne prize to the Prime Minister at the hands of Lionel Jospin, the French premier, in Aachen in May. I took the liberty of leaving the Chamber for a few moments to retrieve the press cutting that I remembered of that occasion. There was something that

[Dr. Julian Lewis]

I knew I wanted to lay before the House and I could not rely on remembering it accurately enough if I did not make a check. I am glad that I took the trouble to check. I now know what it was that so jarred when I listened to the hon. Lady. It was the inscription on the medal presented to the Prime Minister. It read, "Peace and Merger in Europe". Unfortunately, I fear that that is being lined up for this country.

Imagine what the effect would have been if the United Kingdom had been merged with a united Europe in many of the wars gone by. We would have been forced to abandon the geographical defence advantages that our country, being an island, has conferred upon us. The arrival of a defence set-up in Europe would mean that, if we disagreed with a majority of our fellow European partners on a defence policy to face down aggression or to respond to a threat, we would be overruled. That would have led in the past to a situation where our salvation and the subsequent salvation of occupied states in Europe could never have been achieved.

I was struck by the remarks of my hon. Friend the Member for Bournemouth, East (Mr. Atkinson) earlier in the debate about ballistic missile defence. I have been impressed by the fact that my hon. Friend is never afraid to be something of a lone voice or something of a prophet. Some would even say that he is a something a Cassandra. I remember previously listening to him stressing to the House time and again the dangers of the millennium bug. At one stage, he was a voice in the wilderness. However, everyone believes in the millennium bug now. My hon. Friend has moved on and has turned his attention to possible future problems arising from our lack of ballistic missile defence, and the danger that guided missiles could be used to wreak destruction with no protection for this country. Perhaps it could be speculated that the advent of the millennium bug will save this country from the use of ballistic missiles against it. Perhaps after the year 2000, they will not function properly. However, I should not like to gamble with our future security purely on that basis.

Mr. David Atkinson: I thank my hon. Friend for his kind remarks. Is he aware of the report in *The Daily Telegraph* recently which quoted an American defence official who warned that if Saddam Hussein wanted to send a missile to Europe, 1 January—the next new year—would be the day to do so?

Dr. Lewis: No, I was not aware of that report, but the example of Saddam Hussein is apposite. The point about ballistic missile defence is that it can be applied in three very different contexts.

The first context is that to which my hon. Friend alluded when he referred to the V1 and the V2. The V1, as he rightly pointed out, was the first cruise missile, and the V2 was the first ballistic missile. This country had no physical means of defence against the V2. Although it was possible to create counter-measures against the flying bomb—the V1—it was impossible to do anything against the V2, other than to use deception measures to convince the Germans that they were overshooting the targets when they were falling short, and thus to persuade them to shorten the range still further.

If one can develop a defence against conventionally armed missiles, one will proportionately reduce the weight of the attack. What that means in ordinary language is that, if one can knock down 70 or 80 per cent. of those incoming missiles, one will reduce the damage to one's country by 70 or 80 per cent. However, the situation gets more complicated in the era of weapons of mass destruction, whether nuclear or biological. Under those circumstances it is not good enough to knock down 70 or 80 per cent., because if 20 or 30 per cent. get through, the devastation will be equivalent to total annihilation.

There is therefore another circumstance in which ballistic missile defence is valuable, and a third circumstance in which it is of no value whatever. Ballistic missile defence in the mass destruction era is valuable if the aggressor has at his disposal only a small number of nuclear or biological weapons. Because he does not have anything like an overkill capability, it is worth being able to counter as many of the incoming missiles as possible, as there is a chance of knocking out of the equation all those that would otherwise get through, or at least making a significant difference to the level of damage that the country would suffer.

However, against a super-power equipped with hundreds or even thousands of weapons of mass destruction, it is living in a fool's paradise to believe that ballistic missile defence can save one's country from destruction. In a way, that is a good thing. I have always been a believer in nuclear deterrence. I have always supported our national policy of minimum nuclear deterrence.

That policy depends on the very fact that, once one has the ability to retaliate against an aggressor by replying with 50 or 100 nuclear warheads that will reliably reach their targets, it does not matter whether the aggressor has many thousands of nuclear warheads with which to threaten his victim. Precisely because a relatively small proportion of nuclear warheads getting through in retaliation is all that is required to inflict unacceptable damage on an aggressor, his overkill capability is worthless, meaningless and of no value except perhaps political—certainly, of no strategic significance.

The Secretary of State said that people should not forget the Government before this. Nor, in my view, should people forget the Opposition before this. Who would have dreamed 10 years ago that we would find ourselves with a Labour Government who had, rightly and apparently successfully, stood up to military aggression on a point of principle, as I said in the Kosovo debate the other week, because we were not prepared to see innocent people being murdered and brutalised? Who would have thought that a Government of the Labour persuasion would supervise a successful military campaign that inevitably involved inflicting considerable devastation on a civilian environment?

It is astonishing to see the way in which the workings of the democratic system in this country have paid off. Those of us who fought to persuade the unilateral nuclear disarmers on the then Labour Benches that they were mistaken may have had an intellectual input into the debate, but the people who really deserve the credit for the fact that we now have a Government who are prepared, under the right circumstances, to use military action properly are the electorate of Great Britain who, in 1983 and again in 1987, showed the Labour party that it would not get re-elected unless it dropped the policy of one-sided nuclear disarmament.

I welcome the fact that Labour dropped that policy. It pretended to drop it in 1989, using various formulae such as "We will give up one of ours if the Russians will give up one of theirs." That was rather like someone who lives in a bungalow and his neighbour who lives in a skyscraper each offering to give up one floor. However, between 1989 and July 1991, when the right hon. Member for Manchester, Gorton (Mr. Kaufman) wrote an article in *The Guardian*—where else?—finally admitting that Labour would keep nuclear weapons as long as other countries had them, the Labour party slowly crept back to a responsible position on defence.

As someone who believes more strongly in the defence of this country than in the victory of any particular political party at a general election, I welcomed that, even though I know that it would make my job as a Conservative political organiser much harder in terms of fighting the Labour party in the future. I am glad that Labour did what it did, and I think that now most members of the Labour party are also glad that they did what they did.

One or two Labour Members are not so pleased. Among those I include the hon. Member for Leyton and Wanstead (Mr. Cohen), who is not in his place at present. He has consistently supported the unilateral nuclear disarmament line. Because I disagree with him on that, it does not follow that I must disagree with him on every point in his analysis. He was right, for example, when he said that, in terms of deterrence, it is a mistake to say that uncertainty is equivalent to stability.

Over the past 20 years, I have heard that argument advanced by many people who believe in NATO and in nuclear deterrence. They say that the key to deterrence is uncertainty. Well, only up to a point: uncertainty whether one will use force is obviously better for purposes of deterrence than certainty that one will not use force. But the certainty of retaliation with force if necessary is the best deterrent of all.

That was why, to return to the point with which I began, it was a terrible mistake, even if we did not intend to use ground forces in Kosovo, to say that—because we replaced what limited value uncertainty as to whether we would might have had, in our bargaining position with Milosovic, with certainty on his part that we would not do so. As I predicted before, and as time will bear out, it will eventually be discovered that Milosovic gave in when he no longer held to the certainty that we would not use ground forces if he did not comply.

I have some examples from history. During the second world war, we used two different methods of mass destruction on German and Japanese cities. Terrible fire storms were caused by the 1,000-bomber raids and terrible destruction and annihilation were caused by the dropping of the atomic bombs on two Japanese cities. Strangely enough, more people were killed—at least initially—in the fire raid on Tokyo in 1945 than in Hiroshima or Nagasaki. So why did the individual bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki bring about surrender whereas the fire storm on Tokyo did not?

The answer comes back to the word "uncertainty". When the bombers took off for a fire raid, be it on Tokyo, Nuremberg or Hamburg, no one could know in advance with certainty how that would work out. The outcome could have been, as it was in the case of Tokyo, Cologne and Hamburg, absolute devastation. On the other hand, the outcome could have been, as it was in the case of the infamous Nuremberg raid, that the bomber stream would be intercepted, that the fleet of aircraft would be massacred and that the city would hardly be touched at all. Precisely because the target country did not know in advance that it was certain to incur the devastation and destruction that did occur, it was prepared to take the risk of incurring it. But as soon as the Japanese saw that there was no uncertainty, that the dropping of single bombs meant the certain destruction of their homeland city by city, they had no alternative but to surrender. Therefore, the maintenance of deterrence depends on the certainty of one's opponent that he cannot possibly escape the military consequences of defiance and attack.

I am sorry to have dwelt in some detail on that point, but it is essential that a myth is not created by what seems to have been the successful result of the Kosovo campaign—that one can rely on unsupported conventional air power to bring about compliance. One day, we may get into a situation where other decisive factors—the possible use of ground forces and Russia's diplomatic support—may not be available. Then we would discover our mistake too late.

I was surprised at the references made by the hon. Member for Edgbaston to the maintenance of peace, and the achievement, of which she is rightly proud, of being returned to the House—as someone born in Munich—for a British constituency, but I found it difficult to follow the mental processes that led her to conclude that that was something to do with the European Union or any of its predecessor institutions. I am not aware of any military threat to our democratic systems between the end of the war and the creation of those institutions, which was done away with by the creation and the activities of those institutions.

The reason why the hon. Lady was successful—I congratulate her on being elected democratically to represent Neville Chamberlain's old seat—was because Britain, America and Russia won the war. Having done so, they imposed on Germany a system of democracy and helped to resettle western Europe with a system of free independent democratic states. As I have said before, and shall no doubt say again, the lesson of history is that wars seldom, if ever, break out between two democratic states. They break out between combinations of democracies and dictatorships, and dictatorships and dictatorships, but seldom, if ever, soley between democratic states.

As a result of the creation of a system of free independent democratic states in Europe, together with the military alliance of NATO with which they can be involved if they wish, or from which they can distance themselves or withdraw if they wish, the system that has secured the peace for half a century can be preserved. Only now that it has been put to the test, at the end of the century, can we see that it has been capable of dealing with a re-emergence of something that should never have been allowed to get this far.

Therefore, to put at risk the system that has preserved the peace, by messing around, monkeying around and fiddling around for the sake of some basket of trade-offs, as my hon. Friend the shadow Secretary of State said—because the Prime Minister wishes to remain at the heart of European affairs, and he knows that he dare not try to take Britain into the single currency at this point—is folly in the highest degree.

[Dr. Lewis]

I understand that, today, we are not discussing in detail the question of the release of the identity of the soldiers being investigated in relation to Bloody Sunday and I shall be careful what I say. I refer to it only in one connection, although it is a connection that may prove fatal to them. Whatever the court decides, there is a risk that the damage has already irrevocably been done. If their names and addresses have been released quite independently of the court's decision, and if they go on to the internet, there will be no prospect of preventing them from being copied, recopied, published and advertised to those in terrorist organisations who would wish to do the soldiers harm whether they be guilty or innocent.

The internet is not always dangerous. It can sometimes have a use which is more poignant and constructive. I close my remarks by referring to a site which I found recently—the site of the Commonwealth War Graves Commission. There, it is possible, by keying in the name of anyone killed in the first or the second world war, to find out the place and date of death and such other details as were available at the time. I was moved the other day to do that in connection with the father of a close friend of mine, Mr. Ray Brooks of Totton in my constituency. He expressed an interest in learning what details had been retained. Sure enough, up came the information, and the certificate in memory of Stoker 1st Class Bert Brooks of HMS Cape Howe, Royal Navy, which I have here, was duly printed off. The ship went down fighting on 21 June 1940, and he was aged only 33.

We owe peace in Europe and the triumph of democracy to the sacrifice of hundreds of thousands of people such as Bert Brooks. It would be a terrible disgrace to their memory if we wilfully destroyed what has been built up so successfully, and what has been tried and tested so recently, by undertaking unwise experiments to modify and replace institutions that have proved their value beyond all question.

4.31 pm

Mr. Tam Dalyell (Linlithgow): I take the view that there should be some time sharing among us when colleagues have been waiting all day to speak, so I hope to be succinct and shall put my speech in the form of questions.

The first question arises out of the speech of the hon. Member for New Forest, East (Dr. Lewis). I listened extremely carefully to what he said about air power, and this question is perhaps less to him than to my hon. Friend the Under-Secretary. Is it true that air power was decisive? As I understand it, the attacks round Mount Pastic by the KLA guerrillas early last week threatened to split the Yugoslav forces by capturing the road linking Prizren and Pec. At that point, they had to come out from bunkers and from their positions to deal with what were, in effect, land forces.

The KLA fighters were land forces at the time and, in those circumstances, the Yugoslavs took serious casualties—they had to deploy large units and therefore became relatively easy targets, for the American Warthogs in particular. If that is considered accurate by the Ministry of Defence, does it not suggest that land forces were indeed decisive in persuading the leadership in Belgrade to act as it did?

Secondly, I was asked—in rather strident terms at business questions and far more courteously by the Secretary of State for Defence—to apologise. There will perhaps be an apology from me, but it will not come until five years have elapsed. I think that Pandora's box has been opened and the horrors that have been unleashed by the bombing are almost unimaginable.

I say that partly out of experience of Bosnia. As one of those who never wanted us to go into Bosnia in the first place, I have to agree with the hon. Member for Portsmouth, South (Mr. Hancock): how on earth and—this question has to be asked at an early stage—in what circumstances will we ever get out of Kosovo? I do not think that we will do so in my lifetime and I rather doubt whether we will do so in the lifetime of the youngest among us.

My third question is, how exactly do the Government think that the Russians fit into this picture? What is to be the Russian chain of command? Is it not true that the war ended earlier than it would have done because of remarkable Russian good will? That is ironic, because the Russians were sidelined by the United States and the United Kingdom for at least a fortnight at the beginning of the conflict. When we found that immediate bombing did not work, we realised that we needed the Russians.

I shall quote briefly my friend Paul Wilkinson, who is a professor at St. Andrews university. He says:

"A major lesson is that Russia, for all its domestic problems, is still a key player. It is foolish and dangerous to world peace to try to exclude Russia from the top table of international decision making. The same is true of China".

I have a particular question about the Russians, which has been eloquently put in a letter from a man I do not know, Albert McFall, to *The Independent*. He says:

"If a Nato and Russian peace-keeping force does eventually enter Kosovo, there could be problems in the future.

If as seems very likely the Serb government breaks agreements and resumes ethnic cleansing, Nato would presumably withdraw its peace-keeping troops. The air attacks would start again and Nato would then be bombing Serb and Russian troops who would remain. Would Nato also attack Russian lines of communication such as ships and transport aeroplanes?"

That question needs at least a comment.

The military advisers to Mr. Chernomyrdin, as I understand it, were insistent that there should be an autonomous Russian chain of command and it is reported that there was some conflict between him and his military staff officers. He had to say rather sharply that he alone had President Yeltsin's authority to negotiate, but those people are still there in Moscow and we should take notice of that. What is the Government's understanding in respect of the treatment of Russian troops who may be in Kosovo for a long time?

My fourth question refers to the Kosovars. They think that they are to go back to Kosovo and will get independence, although they also think that we may have gone back on that. Have we inherited another Balkan protectorate? The hon. Member for Portsmouth, South raised very powerfully the question of the KLA, which is now a tough little guerrilla army. Those partisans are unlikely to welcome the transition from beneficiaries of NATO close air support to disarmed wards of NATO peacekeepers now serving as the outriders of Serb sovereignty, if it be the case that Serb sovereignty is to remain.

I think that disarming the KLA is an horrendous prospect, partly because I am sufficiently old to remember my contemporaries going to Malaya when I was in the Rhine Army. One of the problems in Malaya was that we could not tell the difference between a civilian and a guerrilla. It would be the easiest thing in the world for the KLA fighters to melt away, pretend to be civilians and then—unless there is a rigorous chain of command, which I gather does not exist in such a form—simply reappear.

It is difficult to be sanguine, and how on earth will we make sure that the KLA surrenders arms? I am afraid that my question of Tuesday to the Prime Minister remains: is there any evidence that the KLA will be any more willing to give up its arms than the IRA? If NATO troops enter Kosovo, the peacekeepers may find themselves having to protect Serb civilians from the KLA. It is undoubtedly true that Agin Ceku—who, incidentally, is a Croat—and Hashem Thaqi, who is one of the political leaders, are among a whole group who are absolutely determined on revenge. It seems that we will be in Kosovo for a very long time.

On 8 June, in *The Independent*, Timothy Garton Ash wrote:

"So you thought it was all over? Don't fool yourself, please. There are several nightmares still ahead. Even if the Yugoslavian military finally accepts withdrawal terms, they—and especially the paramilitaries—can make a last round of bloody mayhem on the way out. On their heels will follow the KLA, a rag-tag army of furious young men, who have seen comrades killed, sisters raped, families deported.

I and the public know

What all schoolchildren learn.

Those to whom evil is done

Do evil in return.

Auden was right; and these Albanians will do evil in return."

They are determined to do so. How will we prevent them? It will be a mightily difficult job.

Yesterday I asked about war crimes, which, I understand, are not mentioned in the peace proposals. I also understand that the Russian Parliament is unwilling to accept a draft resolution calling on all concerned to help in the investigation of atrocities.

Fifthly, the Prime Minister urges the Serb people to overthrow their ruler, and says that there will be no money while he remains. Some of us think it more likely that, if left to themselves, the Serb people will deal with President Milosevic. If we try to insist, even at this stage, that they chose a ruler on our terms, is it not more probable that President Milosevic's power and grip will be strengthened? As the policy towards President Milosevic and war crimes was left out of the formal document, I now ask what it is.

Sixthly, may we have some facts about the massacres? The Albanians have repeatedly said that all these people have been massacred. The fact is that, although they are in a terrible state, many seem to have emerged. In war, all sorts of things are exaggerated, and one does not know what to believe. Undoubtedly appalling atrocities have taken place, but it would be helpful to know the scale of those atrocities, and in particular to know about rape. Serbs have vehemently denied that rape has taken place on a large scale. No doubt it has happened from time to time, but they deny it, and I think that it is now up to us to produce evidence relating to what is, after all, an emotive subject—and rightly so.

Seventhly, may we have some information about the attitude to depleted uranium? A survey should be carried out as quickly as possible, especially in respect of those removing tanks that have been hit by armour-piercing shells. I may be in a slightly different position from Ministers in this regard, but in Iraq I saw the results of depleted uranium—used in the Gulf war by, I think, the Americans rather than us. There is every evidence that these appallingly emaciated infants are victims of that kind of shelling, and we really do need to conduct a survey as soon as possible.

When I asked about that last night, the Secretary of State for Defence replied:

"On the environmental impact, certain aspects of Yugoslav life will be affected by the bombing."—[*Official Report*, 9 June 1999; Vol. 332, c. 749.]

That is certainly true, but the scale of the environmental catastrophe affects all of Europe: environmental catastrophe knows no boundaries.

My eighth question is this. What is the assessment of the number of soldiers who will return in the next few months to find that they have no jobs, because their factories have been knocked out? It is a classic problem: a returning army finds that there is unemployment, and inability to work. Therein lies huge mischief.

Ninthly, I want to ask about the clearing of cluster bombs and other armaments. Kosovo is littered with unexploded cluster bombs—dropped by us, I understand. They are not very different from land mines. The Ministry of Defence can take great credit from the land mines treaty, but, although the seriousness of that problem has been recognised, we have not been told who will clear up the cluster bombs.

General Sir Michael Rose has said:

"As the peacekeepers prepare for the formidable tasks ahead of them, they will be reflecting that, in the Balkans, nothing unravels so rapidly as a peace plan where the details have not been clearly defined and agreed by all sides."

My final point is this. What will be done about conflict prevention? In particular, what will be done about the Carnegie report, which has been with the MOD for two years, and about the crisis management unit proposed by the Finns?

I promised to share the allotted time, and I will stick to that promise.

4.47 pm

Mr. John Wilkinson (Ruislip-Northwood): The Chamber has shown itself to be fully representative today—representative, perhaps, of the apathy in the country in regard to the European elections, and the lack of attention that we politicians sadly display in regard to defence matters—even on the day after the signing of the historic agreement between the commanders of the Yugoslav armed forces and NATO on the withdrawal of Serb forces from Kosovo.

Before I say anything else, I must pay tribute to the courage and dedication of our forces in the Balkans, and in particular to the crews of the Royal Air Force, both in the air and on the ground. Air power has shown itself to be the crucial determinant of events in this conflict—as, indeed, it did in Operation Desert Fox, in the Gulf war and in the earlier Falklands war. Although air power has had its detractors during this conflict, we must remember

[Mr. John Wilkinson]

that it is highly unlikely that the Serb negotiators would ultimately have signed without its decisive and devastatingly accurate effects on their compatriots.

The European Union's common foreign and security policy will prove to be no effective substitute for the integrated command structure of NATO and the existence of assigned formations to NATO on the part of its member states. The policy, which my hon. Friend the Member for Stratford-on-Avon (Mr. Maples) so eloquently criticised, is much more. It is—I quote from paragraph 5 of annexe 3 of the Cologne summit communiqué:

"a new step in the construction of the EU".

It is much more the construction of a new political step than the creation of a more effective military defence for our country, western Europe and our alliance as a whole.

Indeed, there is a risk that the European Union's common security and defence identity, which will subsume the role of the WEU by the end of next year, will not, in practice, offer the assurance of complete mutual defence commitment that is enshrined in the Brussels treaty, notwithstanding assurances to the contrary in the communiqué. I believe this to be the case because of the participation in the common foreign and security policy of neutral states such as Eire, Sweden, Austria and Finland, which, in their various ways, have stood aside during the great challenges of the cold war and have not participated in a number of the operations in which our alliance has been engaged in the Gulf and elsewhere. Indeed, there is a risk that token obeisance to

"consideration of ways to ensure the possibility for WEU associate partners to be involved"—

in the phraseology of paragraph 5 of the EU Cologne summit presidency communiqué—will replace the possibility, which should become a reality, of applicant countries such as the Baltic states becoming full members of the NATO alliance.

We should remember that, in London not so long ago—in fact, only a few weeks ago—Foreign Secretary Ilves of Estonia emphasised the crucial benefit to his country and to his two Baltic neighbours of full participation in the Washington treaty's mutual defence obligations for the Baltic states. The Baltic states are democratic. They have the rule of law. In every way, they are as much entitled to be full members of NATO as to be full members of the European Union. The EU's common foreign and security policy provisions are no substitute for the genuine security guarantees that NATO membership could offer to the Baltic states.

The risk is heightened by the demarche—the initiative—towards good relations with Russia, which I fully understand, in the Cologne summit communiqué. Friendly relations with Russia are, of course, fundamental to peace and security in our continent, but we must never allow Russia to dictate the membership of NATO, or to preclude the enlargement of NATO through the accession of democratic nations such as the Baltic states or, for that matter, Romania and Bulgaria, which, by virtue of the rule and law and democracy, are fully entitled to that membership.

I must criticise, as did my hon. Friend the Member for Stratford-on-Avon—I quote from the annexe to the communiqué—

"the need to undertake sustained efforts to strengthen the industrial and technological base, which we want to be competitive and dynamic".

The objective of the Cologne meeting was laudable in this respect. Everyone wants better value for money for the defence forces. Everyone wants to ensure that defence procurement is, in the jargon, smart and efficient and presents the best equipment for our armed forces at a price which we can afford, but the means that the European Union has chosen will militate directly against such competitiveness and dynamism. The European armaments agency of the leading EU nations will inevitably accord priority to procurement from EU member states and institutionalise European protectionism against the most cost-effective defence equipment in the world, which is usually American.

The common foreign and security policy summit declaration contains no mention of heightened transatlantic co-operation in weapons procurement. That flies in the face of the commercial benefits derived by British Aerospace, Rolls-Royce, GKN and many other leading British defence equipment companies from their participation in the north American market.

Paragraph 5 of annexe III of the Cologne summit communiqué speculated that

"by the end of the year 2000 . . . the WEU as an organisation would have completed its purpose."

The end of the Assembly of the WEU would be a great loss, as a speech by my hon. Friend the Member for Bournemouth, East (Mr. Atkinson) on ballistic missile defence, clearly demonstrated. He has been a rapporteur of his committee on that subject and has contributed a great deal to the work of the WEU and the Council of Europe.

Defence budgets are introduced by national Governments and passed by national Parliaments, so it is fitting that the European parliamentary deliberative body on defence issues should be the Assembly of the WEU, whose delegations comprise Members of national Parliaments, not the European Parliament. The latter's Members have no place in their national Parliaments, little democratic endorsement from their electorate if today's turnout is replicated elsewhere in the European Union, and no direct effect on national defence budgets or defence policy debates.

The intended takeover of the WEU by the European Union is clear from the common foreign and security policy assumptions about the EU taking responsibility for the strategic studies centre and the satellite reconnaissance facility, both of which are WEU institutions.

There is a risk that the creation of a European common foreign and security policy supremo in the person of Mr. Solana, the former socialist Foreign Minister of Spain, will compare unfavourably with the traditional efficient partnership of a European Secretary-General and a United States Supreme Allied Commander Europe for NATO.

Would Britain's intervention in the Falkland Islands war have been facilitated had there been a Spanish EU common foreign and security policy supremo in post? I doubt it. The British victory owed almost everything to United States support, while European backing was singularly absent.

The greatest risk in the European Union's obtaining a defence role in its own right is that it will acquire an instrument for the potential physical coercion of recalcitrant member states—an armed capability against possible secessionist nations.

That may seem alarmist today but, since the European Union asserts the primacy of EU law over that of its member states, is developing its own corpus juris and offers no mechanism for withdrawal from the treaties—the unanimity that such a procedure would require is ruled out in practical terms by the British Prime Minister and others—the alarmism which I display on the issue today could prove to be the realism of tomorrow.

4.59 pm

Mr. Tony McNulty (Harrow, East): Sadly, I must begin as a number of other hon. Members have done by apologising to your good self, Mr. Deputy Speaker, and to both Front-Bench spokesmen, as I doubt whether I will be in my place for the replies. I should add my apologies to those who are waiting for me where I am going, as I will get there rather later than anticipated, but that is by the by. For reasons that I will discuss, I thought it important to be involved in this debate.

As an aside, I have also been asked to mention that hon. Members who have a right and proper concern about nuclear proliferation and defence in the world could do no better than attend tomorrow's debates on private Members' Bills. Hopefully—it is a great hope—the Nuclear Safeguards Bill, promoted by my hon. Friend the Member for Putney (Mr. Colman), will be No. 4 on the Order Paper. I come to the Friday sittings. That Bill seeks to ratify a protocol that would make inspections of countries with nuclear capabilities easier to carry out than is the case now.

Mr. Simon Burns (West Chelmsford): The Bill is No. 5 on the Order Paper.

Mr. McNulty: The hon. Gentleman tells me that the Bill is No. 5, so support in spirit, if not in physical presence, will be welcome tomorrow when we shall also be discussing football hooliganism, on which I shall not dwell now.

It was a little churlish of the hon. Member for Stratford-on-Avon (Mr. Maples), who is not in his place now, to have a little dig about the Adjournment debate on a subject as important as defence being held on European election day, but it is easily done. Imagine my joy on leaving the Chamber, knowing that the last time there were European elections the recess happened to spill over into them, to look up what I thought was the equivalent date in 1989—8 June—and seeing that the Conservative Government had tabled a debate on the Army for that day. I thought that that was a nice little reproach to the hon. Gentleman, until I discovered that the European elections in 1989 were a week later, so my point is not well made. Equally, those who cherish the arts and our heritage may throw up the same remark about what the last Government did in 1989 because arts and our heritage were the subject of the Adjournment debate on 15 June. So, head counts, asking where everybody is, the various little digs that we make and the games that we play in this place are inappropriate, certainly from those on the Front Benches.

In both 1992 and 1997, I was perhaps not as aware as I should have been of how significant defence was and is to my constituency. I have the great pleasure—at times a dubious one; I shall come on to that towards the end of my comments—of having Raytheon, Racal and Marconi in my constituency, as well as RAF Stanmore Park, although sadly no more, RAF Bentley Priory, which has consolidated the work of RAF Stanmore Park and is significant in terms of the RAF, and a Territorial Army unit. Given that background, defence must be of significance and interest for me. That does not mean that I must speak up in favour of everything in connection with Raytheon, Racal or Marconi. Occasionally, this presents me with dilemmas, but I shall come on to that.

I am mindful of the fact that others wish to speak, so I shall dwell on three matters and keep my comments fairly brief: the United Nations; Kosovo, which cannot be ignored; and, given what I have just said about companies in my constituency, procurement—smart or otherwise.

Last year, the hon. Member for Mid-Norfolk (Mr. Simpson) and I, together with others, shared a trip to New York essentially to visit the United Nations. It showed me my profound ignorance of the real internal machinations of the whole range of institutions that make up the United Nations and how they engage with each other. We were there a week or so before the first abortive sorties over Iraq. The planes were literally pulled back at the last moment.

My most lasting impression is of the discussions with both the Security Council personnel and its admin staff, and the peacekeeping staff. They were saying emphatically that, given the collapse of the cold war, the United Nations must reassess and refocus its activities. Those elements have been brought sharply into focus by Kosovo. Back in October or November last year, they were saying that political and military regional bodies had to do much, much more. That means NATO, the Western European Union or the European Union, and equivalents such as the Organisation of American States and the Organisation of African Unity.

Post cold war, as we move into the new millennium, we find that regional conflicts invariably start with—and are sometimes contained within—internal conflicts within a nation. That forces us to reconsider our view of international relations. Even in some democratic areas—certainly in some tyrannies—civil wars, ethnic conflicts or other internecine strife predominate. We have moved away from bloc against bloc or nation against nation. Regional conflicts and power struggles, perhaps carried out by proxy in an internal conflict, as in the Democratic Republic of Congo, are challenges that the military and political architecture of regional and world military relations are not grasping. That is why the United Nations, and in particular the veto power of the five permanent Security Council members, was found wanting.

I want to consider some of the remarks of those who opposed the conflict in Kosovo, because many of them did not make sense. I preface my remarks on the Kosovo conflict and settlement by noting that it is essential that we learn real lessons from the conflict of the past 75 days. Ultimately, I would welcome an apology from my hon. Friend the Member for Linlithgow (Mr. Dalyell), but he is right to say that we will not see the consequences of the fallout of the conflict for at least five years.

If we learn only the lessons of the past 75 days, we will have failed. We had to go through the Kosovo conflict because we did not learn the lessons of the previous 10 years in the Balkans in Bosnia. I am not making a

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party political point and knocking the previous Government, but we did not understand fully what the wrenching away of the autonomy of Kosovo meant. Going back further, we did not understand what the death of Tito meant to the holding together of Yugoslavia. We must consider the reverse domino effect of Slovenian independence, Croatia, Bosnia, Kosovo, Krajina, Vojvodina—throw it all in. If we do not understand the complexities and what really went on in that period, but concentrate only on the past 75 days, we will not learn the real lessons of south-eastern Europe and the Balkans. That would be cause for regret.

If we do not analyse properly the sometimes abject failures of Europe and America in dealing with what happened in the Balkans over the past 10 years, we will plant the seeds of further failures. I do not, as my hon. Friend the Member for Linlithgow perhaps would, include what we have achieved in Kosovo as a failure, because it was very necessary. If we do not analyse the past 10 years properly, no amount of Balkans Marshall aid for Serbia post Milosevic will enable us to bring peace, stability and harmony not only to Kosovo but to the entire Balkan region.

The role played by this House over the past 75 days and before was often strange and perplexing. I freely admit that all Front Benchers acted with discretion and responsibility, but there is a fine line between enjoying the fruits of democracy and maintaining responsibility. I do not think that a significant party leader who, half way through a military action, calls the whole thing unpardonable folly is grown up or responsible. That was shaming, and it should be said loud and clear. That individual should not forget it.

I do not think that it is grown up, responsible or appropriate in the middle of a military action for someone from a military background who is now a Member of Parliament—I am deliberately not naming individuals because it would not be that helpful and many of them are not here; we will have plenty of time to name them later—to call for the head of the commander of the armed forces. "Guthrie must go" is not that useful or appropriate a thing to say half way through a war.

If I am honest, there has perhaps been more intolerance and unworthiness on the Government Benches in disagreements on Kosovo before and after the conflict. I absolutely exclude my hon. Friend the Member for Linlithgow from that.

Mr. Robathan: The hon. Gentleman is being uncharacteristically unreasonable, if I might put it that way as a compliment. In the absence of the person who said, "Guthrie must go"—I did not necessarily agree with my hon. Friend—the hon. Gentleman should note that those of us who have at any stage, as the hon. Member for Linlithgow (Mr. Dalyell) has, served in the armed forces, tend to be cautious before we say, "Let us get in there, boys." I do not state this expecting any praise, but it is part of being in the armed forces that one's life is possibly at risk and the lives of the soldiers under one are at risk. We know what happens when people are killed, and we care about that. The hon. Gentleman has been reasonable, but he should realise that most people of military background do not want to see war for that very reason.

Mr. McNulty: I am grateful for that intervention, and broadly I accept it, but it does not exonerate the hon. Member for Reigate (Mr. Blunt), who said half way through a military action that the commander-in-chief should go. If people have legitimate doubts in a democracy, they can express them, but in their role as politicians rather than in the military, they must accept that with their democratic freedoms come real responsibilities.

Yesterday was the fifth anniversary, or perhaps the 10th—it may be even longer; I cannot remember—of the introduction of broadcasting of the Chamber on television. *[Interruption.]* Radio broadcasting was probably 10 or 15 years ago. It is a train-spotting thing that I read birthday columns and anniversary dates, but I do not remember.

The rights and responsibilities of politicians in a democracy are writ large. We have heard of the strength of the internet. The strength of mass broadcasting is phenomenal. We all know that a word out of place here goes straight down to Belgrade state television. People should make their comments within that context with some tolerance of other opinions and some caution. I contend that no one in the Chamber is a warmonger. No one wanted to run gung-ho to bomb Serbia or its people to hell and back. No one glories in military action.

I defer to the hon. Member for Blaby (Mr. Robathan); I have no military service. I had throughout my life no intention of going into the military in any capacity. That is not to deprecate people who do; we owe a hell of a lot to them. It has been glib in the past 75 days for people to say on their behalf what should and should not happen. I deprecate that, but equally I deprecate those who oppose military action, saying, "There is any number of gung-ho armchair generals here", or, "There are plenty of Biggles here. They do not need me." It was suggested that, if one were in favour of the military action, one could not care less about the lives of the individuals on the front line or their families back at home, and that we regarded it all as some elaborate computer game. I do not take that position. I merely say that those who opposed, and will continue to oppose, what we tried to do through international action in Kosovo should speak with responsibility in a democracy.

It is not right for people to say, as was said at the start of the action, that it was a profound political mistake to suppose that Milosevic was not supported by the mass of patriotic Serbian people, who form one of the great fighting nations of Europe. When we read those words now, 75 days on, half of them sound like a party political broadcast for Milosevic's socialist nationalist party—or whatever it is called. Such words were spoken by grown-up, serious politicians. The words that I noted were spoken by someone who has served for decades in this Chamber. One has to believe that, for some Members on both sides of the House, partisan preferences prevailed rather than the good of our military, the interests of our country and the success of the action. That is reprehensible.

The words that I quoted were spoken by a Conservative Member, but all hon. Members will be aware that I could find equivalent words spoken by Labour Members, which

I should condemn equally. However, when one condemns such words or seeks to engage with them, intolerance creeps in. During the first Adjournment debate on the conflict, I said to one of my right hon. Friends, "What you are saying is all very interesting, but it is not going to do anything for the people of Kosovo. If not this route, what is your alternative?" The best that he could say—and, being practically the Father of the House, he had one up on me—was that perhaps I did not get into the Chamber that often.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. I have listened to what the hon. Gentleman has to say. If he wants to personalise his contributions in the way that he has done, he ought to satisfy the House that he has notified all the right hon. and hon. Members to whom he refers before making those remarks.

Mr. McNulty: I fully accept that, Mr. Deputy Speaker. When I began my speech I said that I was deliberately not going to make such remarks and then I strayed. I shall not do so in future.

Last night, when one of my hon. Friends made some points in relation to the statement on Kosovo—the happy statement that we are at the beginning of a resolution, at least of the military aspects of the situation, although I accept that there is much to do on the peacekeeping and political side—another of my hon. Friends described him as "tired and emotional". As we all know, that is the *Private Eye* code for being less than sober. I do not think that that was appropriate.

My key point is that, in peacetime or during military action, when the House discusses—as is right and proper—defence or military issues, we should be aware that we have a cherished, democratic Chamber, and that brings responsibilities. During the debates on Kosovo, I think that those responsibilities have been abused, and systematically abused, by some hon. Members, although happily by only a few. None the less, that is to be deprecated.

Also to be deprecated is the scant regard for any intellectual depth or rigour in the analysis pursued by some hon. Members. From some Members on the Labour Benches, we hear what might be best described as Mickey Mouse Trot analysis, in which the reality was not how to stop such a brutal tyrant, end ethnic cleansing and stop this madness in Europe at the tail end of the 20th century. Instead, we heard of some elaborate plot—no doubt, an imperialist one—by NATO, in support of economic interests. Stripped bare, that had nothing to do with the military integrity of south-east Europe or Europe, or with British defence and military interests therein; it was all some woeful American ploy to colonise south-east Europe, along with the rest of Europe on an imperialist basis. In the middle of a military action, the House and the people of this country deserved far more than that sort of Mickey Mouse analysis.

We also deserved far more from those Conservative Members—none of whom are in the Chamber at present, I am happy to say—who, half way through the process, did not merely make passing comments about the way in which we should carry out the action, but gave real succour and support to those who opposed us and who might have been firing at our troops, if we were not at the stage that we reached last night. Those Members gave our opponents succour by totally undermining the way that we were going. If they were here, I would happily name them. I think that my analysis will stand.

We need to return to such issues to ensure that all Members of the House conduct themselves properly at all times, but especially at times of military action. Given that our proceedings are recorded and broadcast, it is not appropriate for hon. Members simply to dismiss those with opposing views. I was not elected to bomb other nations or to impose sanctions on them—I am not a warmonger, nor is any Minister. It is outrageous that any hon. Member on either side of the House should show such scant regard for their responsibilities in a democracy as to suggest that anyone who supports action such as that taken in Kosovo is some sort of Biggles or warmonger.

It is crass to believe that, had we followed the suggestions of those who criticised and carped from the sidelines but who offered no alternatives for action—they proposed that we should do nothing while atrocities were committed—we would have reached the stage that we reached last night, of having hope that there will be a lasting settlement. That is nonsense.

Some people now tell us that, had we spoken to the Russians 75 days ago, we would have got to where we are now. They are wrong. Others ask why Kofi Annan was not brought in some time over the past 75 days and why he and the United Nations were not allowed to sort things out. What were they doing during the 10 months prior to our reaching the unfortunate stage of having to take military action?

I hope that all those who, from their comfortable armchairs, attempted to undermine our military action of the past 75 days will look to their laurels and reflect on the sequence of events that has brought us to the unfolding of the peace process. That process will take a long time. Even if an international presence has to stay in the Balkans for a long time to police the area after the return of the refugees to Kosovo, that will be far preferable to our action of the past 75 days, because it may lead to lasting peace and stability.

Finally, I turn to the fairly complex matter of two significant programmes that are crucial to the future of military procurement over the next couple of years. The first is the ASTOR programme—the airborne stand-off radar programme. On behalf of my constituency, I happily recommend that we accept the Lockheed Martin bid, which fortunately includes Raytheon and Marconi, both of which are located in my constituency. Together with Back Benchers on both sides of the House who have similar constituency interests, I hope to persuade Ministers that that is the right way to go.

I have greater difficulty with the other programme, but Members of Parliament have to make decisions regardless of their constituency interests. The programme concerned is BVRAAM—the beyond visual range air-to-air missile programme—which is also essential in terms of smart procurement. My difficulty is that, on the one hand, there is an American-led bid that includes Raytheon, whose headquarters are in my constituency; and, on the other, there is a European bid centred on the Meteor programme, which is led by Alenia Marconi Systems and Matra British Aerospace.

Even though I have two profound and competing constituency interests, I am bound to say that, on balance, I recommend the European bid, not least because it carries

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an air-to-air capability that the Raytheon bid does not have. I have met and discussed the issue with representatives of Raytheon and Marconi and, despite my dual interests, I have concluded that the European and Marconi Meteor programme is preferable.

I shall conclude where I began—I apologise for speaking for longer than even I had anticipated—and stress that defence and military interests are crucial. I wish that hon. Members would take more interest in those issues: they should not constitute the undignified and untrendy wing of international or foreign affairs. The defence industry is a significant employer. When we embark upon military action—I hope that we will not do so again during my term in this place—[HON. MEMBERS: "Four years."] Please let me finish. I hope that that means there will be peace for 20, rather than three, years.

As and when there is military action, those of us in democracies must act in a grown-up and responsible fashion. I fear that, in debating this action over 75 days, some hon. Members have demonstrated a far from grown-up and responsible attitude. That is to their discredit, and I hope that they will reflect on their actions long and hard in the coming weeks and months.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: I call Sir Geoffrey Johnson Smith.

Hon. Members: Hear, hear.

5.26 pm

Sir Geoffrey Johnson Smith (Wealden): Hon. Members are saying "Hear, hear" because they want me to be brief. I think the hon. Member for Harrow, East (Mr. McNulty) is being a little unfair to hon. Members. He assumed that anyone who disagreed with him or did not agree totally with the Government was somehow guilty of disloyalty, of letting down the troops or of being cackhanded. The hon. Gentleman suggested that those hon. Members did not know what they were talking about—or that, when they did, it is was not very palatable.

If the hon. Gentleman had been in the House during the Suez crisis, the Falklands conflict or the Gulf war, he would have heard plenty of criticism flying around the Chamber—just as there was during the second world war. That is how it should be. There is a limit beyond which people should not go, but they should not be muzzled just because this country is involved in a conflict that is hardly controversial. It would be terrible if hon. Members were muzzled in that way.

Mr. McNulty: The hon. Gentleman makes my point far more eloquently than I can. I suggested that many hon. Members went beyond that line. I do not deny that hon. Members should engage in democratic debate.

Sir Geoffrey Johnson Smith: The hon. Gentleman keeps using the word "many". Some hon. Members might regret what they said, but they have apologised and I do not think that their comments were particularly reprehensible. There is no doubt that their views were controversial, but our troops were not in action—we were not in the middle of a Passchendaele scenario. One must have a sense of proportion in such matters.

It is generally agreed that our debates were conducted in a good spirit—although one criticism is worth making. I thought it was wrong to give notice—it was not just the Government's responsibility—of our intention not to send in ground troops. It is a good idea to keep that kind of information in reserve and perhaps state our willingness to use a ground force in some circumstances—some observers went further than that. On the whole, I believe the Government played a notable role in defining NATO's policy, which generated considerable public support and backing from this side of the House.

In that connection, I shall follow up some of the comments made by the Opposition spokesman, my hon. Friend the Member for Stratford-on-Avon (Mr. Maples). I do not wish to speak for longer than is necessary, but I think that we should stress this important point. When the defence industry in this country develops its ability to contribute more powerfully and effectively to our defence structure and to advance technology, it should not be leaned on by Government if it enters into a marriage with American companies.

I have visited the United States many times in recent years and toured many factories. I assure hon. Members that American industry trusts us and thinks that we have something to offer. It does not believe that, if American industry enters into an alliance with us for making equipment, we will leak import information to the opposing side or to its competitors. That is an important point.

I wish to develop some other issues raised by my colleagues. I have no doubt that the comments of my hon. Friend the Member for Ruislip–Northwood (Mr. Wilkinson) were particularly welcome. He drew upon his great experience gained in the Royal Air Force, and his remarks about the importance of air power were confirmed during the Balkans conflict.

I joined the NATO parliamentary assembly in 1981 and therefore frequently come into contact with military and civilian members of the North Atlantic Alliance. NATO's vitality, resilience, adaptability, the power within its grasp and the influence that it brought to bear from 1981 to the present convinced me that, politically and militarily, it is a force that deserves our full support. When we went through the worst period of the cold war, that force helped to preserve peace. In fact, I wonder whether many of us would be here today, speaking our minds, if NATO had not existed.

It is therefore little wonder that, when the awful situation in the Balkans came to the crunch, I could not contemplate NATO's failure. To have done so would have spelt the end of the most successful political and military alliance in our history. As the cold war ended, the Berlin wall came down and the Soviet Union ceased to exist, one questioned the extent to which people jumped on the bandwagon and said, "There is no need for NATO. We need something else."

I shall turn in a moment to the European security and defence identity. It is my fervent conviction that no steps should be taken to undermine the effectiveness of NATO. The new strategic concept that it announced at the Washington summit last month should lead us to believe that there is no security architecture alternative to that presented by NATO. The statement that was issued at the Washington summit recognised NATO as an organisation capable of playing a constructive and defining role in

underpinning the stability and peace without which prosperity, democracy and respect for human rights cannot exist. That is NATO's raison d'etre.

I shall quote some of the comments made in that statement in Washington last month:

"Fifty years ago, the North Atlantic Alliance was founded in troubled and uncertain times."

The statement reminded us of what had been achieved and then continued:

"This new Alliance will be larger, more capable and more flexible, committed to collective defence and able to undertake new missions including contributing to effective conflict prevention and engaging actively in crisis management, including crisis response operations. The Alliance will work with other nations and organisations to advance security, prosperity and democracy throughout the Euro-Atlantic region. The presence today of three new allies—the Czech Republic, Hungary and Poland—demonstrates that we have overcome the division of Europe."

The statement later added that those three new members would not be the last. That point was also made by my hon. Friend the Member for Ruislip–Northwood.

We recognise that, if NATO extends its boundaries, it must learn to co-operate with those countries, notably Russia, which fear the advance of the new NATO strategic concept. I have found no difficulty with that because I know very well that we have no designs on Russia. On the contrary, as many hon. Members have pointed out in today's debate, we have taken extensive steps to work with the Russians and to ask them to come on board. In a minor way, we in the NATO parliamentary assembly have taken our own initiatives. We have had Russians accompanying us, and they have been invited to NATO headquarters to discuss exactly what their difficulties are and the extent to which NATO is trying to bridge the gap that existed between the old NATO and the old Soviet Union.

I have no doubt that the attempt is working because of the willingness to extend NATO's umbrella from the Atlantic across Europe and to fight, through the Founding Act—which was signed by NATO and Russia only in 1997—for the Russians to co-operate with the new NATO strategic concept. That leads me to believe that we now have an opportunity to lay to rest for our lifetime—and, one hopes, for ever—conflict in Europe. For too long, we have suffered instability and bloody wars. I accept the criticism of all who thought that we could have intervened sooner in Bosnia. But we all know democracies; we take time to learn the lessons and to act on them.

We must consider not only how far we can develop the new institutions that have been formed under the Founding Act, the European-Atlantic pact and so on, but whether we can strengthen those already in the alliance. I shall quote from the communiqué and the statement of intentions made in Washington recently concerning the European Union:

"The European Union has taken important decisions and given a further impetus to its efforts to strengthen its security and defence dimension. This process will have implications for the entire Alliance, and all European Allies should be involved in it, building on arrangements developed by NATO and the WEU. The development of a common foreign and security policy includes the progressive framing of a common defence policy. Such a policy, as called for in the Amsterdam Treaty, would be compatible with the common security and defence policy established within the framework of the Washington Treaty."

All the way through that statement and others explaining in more detail the objectives of NATO's new strategic concept, there is an emphasis on a European security defence identity in NATO. My worry is that there are those who, for other reasons, think that the time has come for those in a European pillar to express themselves not necessarily within NATO.

European countries have rightly taken decisions that will require close co-operation between NATO and the WEU and, if appropriate, the European Union. It has been set out clearly in treaties that it is sensible for the EU to develop a sense of responsibility toward its foreign duties. That is why there is talk of a common foreign and security policy. The EU ought to debate those matters. I can understand such talk, but I hope that I will not be accused of having an attack of Europhobia if I suggest that it is one thing to have such a common policy, but another to create, in analysing one's needs and policies, some special European defence identity that is separate from America.

Labour Members, including the Prime Minister, would deny to one's face such an intention, but I know people on the continent—I mix with them through the NATO Parliamentary Assembly—who have not always been happy with what they call "American domination". They fail to realise that the only reason why we had peace during the cold war and why we can have stability and security and take on the responsibility of the Balkans is that the Americans are on side.

Such people do not talk about a European defence identity; they talk about a Euro-Atlantic security system. That is what it is and, unless we recognise that fact, I fear that, once again, we shall place an impossible burden on some European countries that do not want to take responsibilities—they rarely have in the past—or carry the clout that is necessary for the influence that we think important to stability in the Euro-Atlantic area; such stability inevitably leads to ever closer co-operation with the former Soviet Union.

I shall not go into too much detail because I am about to finish my speech. Ten of the members of the Western European Union are also in NATO and the European Union but, when we consider the countries that are in NATO but not the EU, we see a problem. They are the Czech Republic, Poland, Hungary, Turkey, Norway and Iceland. There are also other countries that are not in NATO or the EU, such as Estonia, Bulgaria, Latvia, Lithuania, Romania, Slovakia and Slovenia.

When all those people and all those countries are spread across all those different organisations, why muddle things? Why make things more difficult than they already are? We already have a club worth belonging to, which has worked well. Let us not assume that the European security and defence identity would somehow be better served and more effective if we rearranged the furniture. I do not see why it should be.

Of course one gets worried about that idea. Within five minutes of being appointed, Mr. Prodi was talking about a European army—someone quoted him earlier in the debate. We cannot have that, not when defence is a matter of life and death. It is unrealistic to suppose that we have reached such a degree of comfort with our allies in western Europe that deciding whether to go to war or spend money on defence is a matter that can be taken away from national parliaments.

I beg Government Members, especially defence Ministers, to ask themselves this question. It is one thing to have a row with the Americans about bananas;

[Sir Geoffrey Johnson Smith]

we could have rows with the Americans day after day about trade, and even argue among ourselves. However, if we are to have an argument about defence—

Mr. George Robertson: I always listen to the right hon. Gentleman with great care, because he has a lot of experience, and it is true that we share a close relationship with our allies across the water. We have not fallen out with the United States. The communiqué from the Washington summit made it clear that NATO and the Americans welcomed the initiative being taken forward.

The whole purpose of the Prime Minister's speech and what followed from it is to build European capabilities so that we can complement, not duplicate or compete with, the efforts being made by the United States and NATO. Only an hour ago, I spoke to Defence Secretary Cohen, and congratulated him on, and thanked him for, the United States' contribution to the air campaign. All four Defence Ministers have said that we are committed to building European capability so that we can act with the United States when that makes sense; but alternatively, so that we can take military action sensibly and effectively when the United States does not want to be involved.

Sir Geoffrey Johnson Smith: I understand what the right hon. Gentleman says; his intentions are pure, and would not undermine anything that I have said. That is his view—but there are other views, and they exist among his European allies. That is the point.

People talk about a federation. I am not a Europhobe; I am happy about co-operation with the European Union, but I want to draw a line here. It is difficult to assume that a Europe-wide institution can make decisions for us on matters of life and death. It cannot. Such decisions must be made by consensus, in which case I want a consensus within a wider organisation—one that involves the Americans.

I know what I hear from some senators and congressmen, decent internationalist blokes though they are, who suspect that there are people in Europe who resent what they call American dominance of the alliance, and feel that Europe would be freer, more independent and more responsive to European needs if it had its own defence identity—not within NATO, as is stated in the text of the summit. A European identity is what they hanker for. We cannot deny that when we know that Mr. Prodi is talking about a European defence system and a European army. However, if we adopt that approach we will seriously weaken our position.

I am darned if I can believe that an international organisation that merges into a federation involving a wide range of issues, such as economics and politics, can put defence into the same basket. It is not the function of an international organisation, on a vote, to send people to war, where they may possibly lose their lives. If there is consensus, certainly, but if it is to be done, it should be on the basis of the NATO Alliance, with all its strength and might.

It is difficult for me to assume that we are on the right lines when we do not talk sufficiently, and do something, about the lack of capability in Europe. Only two countries in western Europe—the United Kingdom and France—can act internationally. That is one of the issues that we should be discussing with our continental friends, so that we can get some action out of them rather than talk about institutions. That would be a way of making progress.

We have a duty to bring stability to Europe. The first and difficult problem on the agenda is to ensure that stability and prosperity are brought to the people of south-east Europe as a consequence of peace. It will be difficult, and I am indebted to an article in a publication entitled "The World Today", which drew my attention to the seriousness of the problem that we face. It reads:

"'No language can describe adequately the condition of that large part of the Balkan peninsula, Serbia, Bosnia, Herzegovina and other provinces—political intrigues, constant rivalries, a total absence of public spirit, hatred of all races, animosities of rival religions and an absence of any controlling power.'"

The writer of the article adds:

"Those were the words of Benjamin Disraeli in 1878. They are all too apt today."

5.47 pm

Mr. Andrew Robathan (Blaby): I am delighted to be able to take up the words of my right hon. Friend the Member for Wealden (Sir G. Johnson Smith), not least because I know of similar words from the 19th century. No one could ever accuse my right hon. Friend of being anti-European because he has made a career of not being so. The fact that he should draw attention to the concerns that many of us have about a drive towards a common European defence policy is extremely important. I trust that right hon. and hon. Members on the Treasury Bench will take heed of that.

On a day when British troops are going into what may turn out to be hostile territory in the former Republic of Yugoslavia, it is depressing that so little interest is shown in defence in the House. I know that the European elections are taking place. However, my presence and the presence of every other Member will make no difference to the turnout in my constituency and in all others, and in the regions. It is depressing beyond belief that there are only three Labour Members present, one a Back Bencher, only two Liberal Members and only eight Conservative Members. There are far too few of my hon. Friends in their places and it is a great pity that there is only one Labour Back Bencher present on an historic and worrying day.

I shall concentrate my remarks on Kosovo, not least because I will not be here next week. Many of the points that I wanted to make have already been made and I will not repeat them at too great length. I had many concerns about the campaign, which I made public. I was deeply sceptical that bombing alone would bring the Serbs to the negotiating table. However, it appears that it has done so, and we have an agreement. The Minister will know that not everything is clear, but I congratulate NATO and the Government on what has been achieved so far. I hope that the process will continue and I hope also that all the refugees will go home as soon as possible. It is to be hoped that, eventually, we shall see democratic rule established in Serbia, quite apart from anything else.

It will not surprise anyone when I say that I have a few qualifications. I do not think that there is anybody present to gainsay me—no Member, anyway—when I say that, when I was in the Army, I was taught the principles of war. As I recall, the first principle was the selection and maintenance of the aim. The aim on day 1 was to prevent

humanitarian disaster and ethnic cleansing, and we know that that did not happen. There is no doubt that the principles will have to be rewritten. We know that surprise went out of the window long beforehand. As I am sure that the Minister recognises, the staff colleges will need to re-examine those principles before they try to teach them to any young officer, as I was at the time.

The situation in Serbia, Kosovo, Montenegro, Macedonia and Albania is not better than it was before the bombing campaign started. That does not mean that the bombing campaign was wrong, but we have to admit that the situation is no better than it was then.

We have a long-term commitment, as we have heard, and a huge financial commitment, which Britain, together with others, should be generous in meeting. We also have a huge commitment in terms of troops.

Is the Minister confident that the settlement will lead to some form of democratic administration being established in Kosovo? It has not been democratic up till now, as is self-evident. Rugova appears to represent the Kosovo Albanians, as far as it is possible to know, but it would be tragic if our actions had produced a worse situation in Kosovo than existed before.

The position of the Serbian minority in Kosovo was raised yesterday by the right hon. and learned Member for North-East Fife (Mr. Campbell), among others. It is extraordinarily important that we do not replace one form of ethnic cleansing with another. NATO and the United Nations have turned a remarkably blind eye to the situation of the Serbs in Krajina, who were expelled—ethnically cleansed—by the Croatians, yet we seem to be extremely pally with the Croatian regime of President Tudjman. That is as close to hypocrisy as one can get. One child, one woman or one man is just as good as another child, woman or man, and ethnic cleansing by one group is just as bad as ethnic cleansing by another.

That leads me to the question of who our enemy in Kosovo will be. Troops need to know who their enemy is. When they come across two bands of people shooting at each other, whom are they to defend? It will be extremely difficult. None of us wants to see British troops or others killed in any crossfire, just as we do not want to see people killing each other in Kosovo.

What is the future of the Balkans to be? I say to hon. Members in all parts of the House that the future of the Balkans must be in the hands of the peoples of the Balkans. It is not for us to determine exactly what should happen. Britain, NATO and the United Nations should beware of trying to be the policemen of the Balkans. Down that road may lie chaos.

I have many friends currently in the Balkans who are likely to go into Kosovo in the near future. I will not name them, as that would probably blight their careers for ever. I wish them and everyone else well as our armed forces go in. They will have a great deal to contend with, as we know. In particular, NATO is likely to take casualties from land mines. It is the worst of all things when someone is killed not in action but just walking down a street or through a wood.

On a more flippant note, the old adage warns that we should not go to war in the Balkans or march on Moscow. We have gone to war in the Balkans. I am going to Moscow next week, and I hope that the Minister can assure us that we will not be marching on Moscow next week.

One overriding lesson emerges from the Kosovo campaign. NATO has shown determination and unity, and NATO has achieved success. I shall not repeat what was said extremely well by my hon. Friend the Member for Stratford-on-Avon (Mr. Maples) and by my right hon. Friend the Member for Wealden. However, the Government speak of a common European security identity, which undermines the organisation that has achieved so much and is likely to sideline America in the North Atlantic Alliance. I find that extremely worrying.

I have served in Northern Ireland. I think that I am the only hon. Member present who has done so, although one or two officers and officials in the House have. I speak with feeling because I have seen the intimidation, fear and daily barbarity that can go on in some of the ghettos in Northern Ireland. I have been to funerals of friends and I have spoken at funerals of soldiers, and I have friends still serving there in the armed forces. The Government cannot bend over backwards any further to accommodate the terrorists in Northern Ireland. The Minister will know that we must keep troops there to combat the terrorism.

I particularly speak on this occasion of members of the special forces who have done such sterling work in Northern Ireland in the past. If soldiers fear that they will be identified for any action that they take, if they believe that their lives or those of their families may subsequently be threatened, they will not take the action that we require of them. That is blindingly obvious, but it needs to be stated.

Some in public life, including me and many hon. Members, receive advice and assistance on our personal security. But we understood that that might be a possibility when we went into public life. My hon. Friend the Member for Basingstoke (Mr. Hunter) and my right hon. Friend the Member for Bridgwater (Mr. King) are tailed by heavies in Range Rovers. Lord Mason still has an escort, and I am sure that other former Ministers do too. We expect that, but public servants do not. They expect to be protected by the Government. We must protect public servants or we betray their trust. I am sure that the Minister and the Secretary of State will agree.

I caution the Minister to read the headline of the City edition of the *Evening Standard* today which says, "Paras go in". If we want the paras to go into Serbia, Kosovo or elsewhere, we must protect them, wherever they may be, and we must protect past paras from the prying eyes of murderous terrorists.

I served for 15 years in the armed forces and I was single throughout that time. Single men enjoy being active, on operations and abroad. I was away in various different countries for 12 months in one 15-month period. It was lucky that I was single because a wife would not have tolerated it. However, I had no chance of getting married because I could not meet anyone. Those whom I did meet probably did not fancy me. However, it is a single man's life—or a single woman's life—and young single people enjoy being on operations. But in peacetime, families, and single people who want a social life, become tired of being on operations, and they will vote with their feet and leave.

Retention policies are marvellous but, as the Minister knows, there will be no retention policy if people are fed up with being on operations. For each person on operations, another should be preparing for operations and another recovering from operations. If 40 or 50 per cent.

[Mr. Andrew Robathan]

of the armed forces are on operations, that will not be possible. That would be a great tragedy for Britain and its armed forces.

The armed forces—I used to say this to the previous Government, so the Minister need not parrot it back to me—are too small for the country's and the Government's ambitions. If we are not careful, the common European defence policy will mean that we will not have the Americans to help us either. We have insufficient troops, and, if we are to maintain those ambitions, we may need to pay more for defence.

In the past few weeks, several generals have told me and, I am sure, others, that, based on their experience in Bosnia, the only people who could be trusted when they signed an agreement were the Serbs. They saw that as a bit of a paradox because they did not necessarily have a great deal of time for the Serbs, who had murdered, pillaged and raped. However, they did say that, when the Serb generals put their name to a document, they stuck by it, whereas the Croatians and the Bosnians did not. I very much hope that that turns out to be the case in Kosovo.

5.59 pm

Mr. Keith Simpson (Mid-Norfolk): We in the Chamber are indeed an inclusive body of men and women, although a number of colleagues have said that this important debate on defence policy has been unfortunately timed. I know, for example, that the Chairman of the Defence Committee has written formally to the Leader of the House—and, I believe, to Madam Speaker—to protest about the debate being held on a day on which, for good reasons, a large number of colleagues want to be in their constituencies.

Many hon. Members who would have liked to have contributed were unable to attend, and I mention two of my colleagues—such stalwarts as my hon. Friends the Members for Canterbury (Mr. Brazier) and for Reigate (Mr. Blunt). I should also like to mention the absence of another colleague, but for a different reason. My right hon. Friend the Member for Kensington and Chelsea (Mr. Clark) was unfortunately struck down with a brain tumour at the weekend, but I am glad to say that he is recovering reasonably well. I feel his presence in the Chamber; sitting over my left shoulder, he would have undoubtedly made a number of contributions, both from a sedentary position and from the Floor of the Chamber. I am sure that all Members of the House wish him the best for the future.

We have nevertheless had a good debate and we have heard 11 Back-Bench speakers, a number of whom have had to leave to vote or to return to their constituencies—to quote apathy, in the words of Viscount Whitelaw. The hon. Member for Birmingham, Edgbaston (Ms Stuart) spoke about Britain and her role in defence. I do not necessarily agree with some of her conclusions, but she spoke warmly. My hon. Friend the Member for Bournemouth, East (Mr. Atkinson), who has done a considerable amount of work on ballistic missile defence, raised an important point, which I and other colleagues raised in the defence equipment debate.

The hon. Member for Leyton and Wanstead (Mr. Cohen), who is a member of the Defence Committee, talked, in his inimitable manner, of his reservations about nuclear weapons. The hon. Member for Portsmouth, South (Mr. Hancock), speaking on behalf of the Liberal Democrats, talked with great feeling about the situation in Kosovo and referred to cuts in defence expenditure. I have to say to him that it would have been helpful during the debate on the strategic defence review if the Liberals had voted for our amendment pointing out the cuts in defence expenditure and in the Territorial Army instead of abstaining.

The hon. Member for Wentworth (Mr. Healey) rightly spoke about the outstanding part played by our armed forces, not only in Kosovo, Northern Ireland and Bosnia, but in the United Kingdom, where they work so hard. My hon. Friend the Member for New Forest, East (Dr. Lewis), who has been tremendously consistent in his view that what we are doing in Kosovo is right, once again gave us a superb tour d'horizon on nuclear deterrence and history.

I was surprised that the hon. Member for Linlithgow (Mr. Dalyell) restrained himself and talked only about the effectiveness of the air campaign. I think that he asked only eight or nine questions of the Minister; somebody behind me jokingly said that he would ask about 79, but, in his own way, he has always been very consistent. I am sorry that the hon. Member for Harrow, East (Mr. McNulty) used his speech largely to attack a number of hon. Members, many of whom were not in the House. I might disagree with those hon. Members, as might Ministers, but they nevertheless have the right to express their views.

My hon. Friend the Member for Ruislip–Northwood (Mr. Wilkinson), who completed long service with the Royal Air Force, spoke well on behalf of those who agree with his critique, saying that the European security and defence identity is no substitute for NATO. My right hon. Friend the Member for Wealden (Sir G. Johnson Smith)—who, dare I say it, has considerable experience in defence matters going back decades—also spoke forcefully on why our main defence effort should be within NATO.

My hon. Friend the Member for Blaby (Mr. Robathan), who was the last Back-Bench contributor, brought to the debate his own perspective, which was gained from serving in the armed forces. All Members recognise the fact that, without the men and women who make up our armed forces, this debate on our wider defence policy would be rather academic.

The debate is taking place 10 months after the strategic defence review, and 11 weeks into the bombing campaign against Serbia. As many hon. Members have pointed out, it has been influenced by unfolding events in Kosovo: the welcome news of the Serbian agreement to the military framework, given by the Secretary of State last night, and the news that he gave us this afternoon about the decision by the Secretary General of NATO that we could end the bombing campaign.

I compliment Ministers, and all the military and civil servants in the Ministry of Defence. I understand the strain that they were under, and appreciate all the work that they put in. During the Gulf war campaign, I served as a special adviser to my right hon. Friend the Member for Bridgwater (Mr. King), and I know what the responsibility involves. I pay tribute to Ministers on their ability—on the whole—to present information to the House, and to accept with considerable good grace the comments and, at times, criticisms made not only by Opposition Members, but by some of their hon. Friends.

The paying of that fulsome tribute, however, will not restrain me from commenting on aspects of the Government's defence policy that I believe need changing or modifying.

All hon. Members have rightly said that the British armed forces are real force multipliers. Their sheer quality, their professionalism and the fact that—dare I say—they have a demonstrable war-fighting capability enable them to deter and, when they must use that war-fighting capability, to defend our freedoms. However, they obviously need the resources that will allow them to maintain that high standard: equipment, and the support that they and their families need.

Ironically, last night's statement, like earlier statements, is being overtaken by global communications. The same happened during the Gulf war. I am struck by the frequency with which Ministers who come to the House in all honesty to present what they think is information are behind the internet or, indeed, CNN. This is an opportune moment for us to assess British defence policy against the Government's own baseline, the strategic defence review. We need to assess it in terms of foreign and security policy, then in terms of commitments and resources, and finally in terms of equipment and people.

I must tell the Minister, in a gentle manner, that—along with many other hon. Members—I am still waiting for answers to questions that we put to Ministers during the defence equipment debate on 26 April.

Mr. Spellar: They have had nothing else to do since then.

Mr. Simpson: I am aware of that, but I have telephoned twice, and have twice been given promises—not by the Minister's office, but by another office. As I say, I am making my point in the gentlest possible way, but I must say that debates such as this are rather a waste of time if hon. Members who ask questions are given no answers.

The MOD will of course want to assess the role of the armed forces in the continuing conflict, but I think that many hon. Members expect both the Government as a whole and the MOD to make their own inquiries about the origins of the conflict—about where we made the right decisions, where we made the wrong ones, and how we should correct our mistakes.

Finally, let me ask the Minister when we can expect the publication of the defence White Paper which now replaces the statement on the Defence Estimates. Can we look forward to receiving copies before the summer recess?

I want to say a little about the baseline of the strategic defence review. I remind the House that both the Select Committee on Defence and the Conservative Opposition pointed out that the real element that was missing from the report—an element that is still missing—was a foreign-policy baseline. We have not had a proper Government foreign policy debate since May 1997, and I believe that one is needed now.

My hon. Friend the Member for Stratford-on-Avon (Mr. Maples) outlined Conservative Members' deep reservations about the way in which the Government have, crab like, moved away from maintaining a European defence and security policy under the umbrella of NATO towards something that many people believe will end up competing with NATO. As many of my hon. Friends have pointed out, that will compete with resources. Many serving officers, some of whom are directly involved in Kosovo, are also deeply sceptical about the effectiveness of a European defence organisation that is outside NATO. The one thing that the Kosovo conflict has proved is that, however creaky NATO has been, it is effectively the most significant political military organisation to which we belong.

Another equally significant development during the Kosovo crisis has been the articulation by the Government that we are moving into an era of humanitarian intervention. In a speech in Chicago in April, the Prime Minister laid down what became called the Blair doctrine, outlining a policy of humanitarian interventionism, with a number of caveats. That is an important development, but we have not discussed it yet in the House.

If the Government are determined to go ahead with a policy of humanitarian interventionism, it will have an enormous impact on our foreign policy, on our relations with NATO, on the structure of our armed forces and on resources. Will there be a debate on that at some time in the Chamber? Will there be any geographical limits to humanitarian interventionism? What co-ordination have the Government had with the United States of America and our European allies? As a number of my hon. Friends have pointed out, 80 per cent. of the air power and many of the strategic assets in the Kosovo campaign were provided by the Americans.

What are the implications of the Blair doctrine for British defence policy, particularly in terms of the budget, equipment and personnel, given the resources constraint that is built into the strategic defence review? Finally, will there be a reassessment of the SDR and will that form part of the defence White Paper?

In an ideal world, we would have established our foreign and security policy before allocating the necessary resources. When the strategic defence review was published, it was obvious to all informed sources that there was a cut in the budget—about £1 billion. Treasury calls for efficiency savings are making it even more difficult for Ministers to deliver what in management terms we have to call a military output. Even before Kosovo, my hon. Friends and I argued that a cut in defence expenditure while maintaining and, in some areas, increasing commitments, undermined the credibility of the SDR.

Events in Kosovo and the consequence of the Government's declared foreign and security policy of humanitarian interventionism totally undermine the financial basis of the strategic defence review. That is not something that merely I put forward as a Conservative spokesman. Many hon. Members find that members of the armed forces and their families recognise that fact. They are not taken in by politicians coming out merely with trite political propaganda. They are intelligent, sensible people and understand that there is that contradiction.

Will the Government now admit that their claims that the SDR would establish our defence requirements in the period to 2015 have been undermined by the cuts and seriously been questioned by international events? What representations have the Minister and his colleagues made to the Chancellor of the Exchequer and Prime Minister about the level of resources for the defence budget?

[Mr. Simpson]

Failure to address the major question of resources, which underpins the SDR, will result in a significant lack of confidence among members of the armed forces.

One of the major consequences of the Government's failure to match resources to commitments has been the serious problem of overstretch and retention, as touched on by my hon. Friend the Member for Blaby.

As of 22 April—the figures are probably higher now—89 per cent. of land command, which is the deployable Army, is either committed to, or warned for, operations. The Secretary of State himself said this afternoon that 50 per cent. of the British Army was preparing for, deployed in, or recovering from, operations.

The armed forces are there to be used and they expect that. They are not to be kept in a band box, shined up and never used. However, everyone recognises—the Government recognised it in the SDR—that there is a limit to how much longer we can continue that level of commitment without members of the armed forces voting with their feet, as my hon. Friend the Member for Blaby said.

I hope that the Government will deal with that problem directly—that will take some difficult decisions. I know that they are hoping that the Kosovo commitment will not continue on such a scale or for longer than six months, but, as General Sir Roger Wheeler, Chief of the General Staff, reminded us in a lecture at the Royal United Services Institute for Defence Studies on 17 February 1997:

"We are now in our seventh year in Bosnia, despite the original deployment being ordered on the strict understanding that it was for six months only."

Long overseas deployments and back-to-back deployments mean that more trained personnel are leaving the armed forces than recruits can be brought in. I am sure that the Minister will remind us that the Government have dealt with the problem of recruitment, but for every service man who is coming in through the front door, two or three are leaving through the back door.

The latest shortfall in numbers of trained personnel is 4 per cent. for the Navy, 6 per cent. for the Army, 2.5 per cent. for the Royal Air Force and 8 per cent. for the Royal Marines. For every soldier, sailor or airman who is not there, others have to stand in and work harder.

The Government have failed, despite all their remedial efforts and hype, to resolve the relationship between commitments and resources. If anything, matters are worse than they were a year ago. How are Ministers going to resolve that?

The most glaring example of the SDR failure is the cuts in the Territorial Army and its subsequent reorganisation. Under pressure from my hon. Friends and many Labour Members, the Government were forced to make concessions in their reorganisation in the autumn. The Secretary of State acknowledged last night that 10 per cent. of our forces in Bosnia now come from the TA. Any significant war fighting in the Balkans would directly involve a large-scale call up of the TA.

The Government were wrong to cut the TA to extent that they did. Many TA soldiers are now reluctant—because of the Government's cuts and, as my hon. Friend the Member for Banbury (Mr. Baldry) said last night, because of worries about the security of their employment and pensions—if they are called up for service.

I have raised a series of issues in the debate and I have done so not merely to play some sort of intellectual ping pong. I hope that the Minister will recognise that many of those questions were put to me by serving members of the armed forces, civil servants and, not least, people in British defence industries.

I want British defence policy to be proactive. I believe, as do all my hon. Friends, that Britain has a part to play on the world stage. I fully support our membership of the United Nations and our leading role in NATO but, if we are to undertake that sort of role and if we expect our armed forces to go into harm's way almost continuously, we must either cut a commitment somewhere or put in more resources.

General James Wolfe, who died at Quebec, said that war was an "option of difficulties". Today, defence policy is an option of difficulties and I hope that the Minister will be able to offer us some thoughts for consideration.

6.19 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Defence (Mr. John Spellar): First I give the apologies of the Secretary of State for not being present for the winding-up speeches. He has a long-standing engagement, hosting Her Majesty at beating the retreat. I have just had a message from his office and I am pleased to inform the House that the United Nations Security Council resolution has been passed. The voting was 14 in favour with only one abstention. It will now go to the North Atlantic Council for it to authorise NATO's deployment. I am sure that that is welcome news to the House and the forces.

It is only natural that much of the debate has focused on events in the Balkans. Whether one is critical or supportive of Nato's actions, one cannot deny the importance of what is happening there and, indeed, evolving even as we have been speaking. It is not surprising that the subject has pre-occupied hon. Members this evening, but it is also important to look at the broader context, as a number of hon. Members did, and, as the Secretary of State said in his opening speech, not to forget that much else has occupied us over the past 12 months.

It has been a debate with a number of the usual suspects and, as my hon. Friend the Member for Harrow, East (Mr. McNulty) said, with a number of absentees. We should have liked to see the hon. Member for Banff and Buchan (Mr. Salmond) after the Scottish electorate gave him their view of his intervention. The hon. Member for Blaby (Mr. Robathan) apologised for the hon. Member for Reigate (Mr. Blunt), but I should have preferred to have seen him here himself tonight apologising for his disgraceful attack on the Chief of Defence Staff—but let us leave that aside.

We have seen events in Kosovo confirming the analysis that we conducted to inform the strategic defence review and the foreign and security policy framework in which it was set.

At the time of the SDR, as the hon. Member for Mid-Norfolk (Mr. Simpson) said, our policies and plans were met with approval by our allies. It was recognised by a wide variety of independent commentators as radical, imaginative, well reasoned and forward looking. The SDR was given good reviews by academics, journalists and diplomats from Los Angeles to Moscow to Tokyo. Most importantly, it was welcomed by the men and women of

our services. Britain was seen to be giving a lead in adapting to the realities of the new millennium and the post-cold war environment.

Our defence and security policy is founded on Britain's need, as a trading nation with a strongly international outlook and a considerable number of citizens living abroad, to be involved on the world stage. The Government's defence and security policy aims to provide and improve our abilities to take our place on the world stage.

As my hon. Friend the Member for Harrow, East said, the British have never been ones to stand idly by. Our policies are designed to ensure that we are not forced to. In particular, they are designed within the context of the NATO alliance. That is why the United Kingdom made a significant contribution to ensuring that Nato's 50th anniversary summit in Washington set a challenging agenda to keep Nato relevant for the future and commemorated 50 years of keeping peace in Europe. I am sure that the hon. Member for New Forest, East (Dr. Lewis), who spoke at some length about the history of NATO, will also recognise the key, initiating role of the post-war Labour Government in setting up NATO and the support of subsequent Labour Governments for that organisation.

Headlines at Washington were naturally dominated by Kosovo, where the display of Nato unity was of immense military and political value, but several other important decisions were also taken on the further adaptation of Nato.

The new strategic concept sets out clearly Nato's key tasks, giving proper emphasis to non-article 5 missions and clear guidance on the development of flexible, deployable and sustainable forces suitable for all Nato missions.

The UK was active in developing the defence capabilities initiative, which should allow the alliance to develop forces that are ready to undertake the range of operations we may face in the future. The hon. Member for Stratford-on-Avon (Mr. Maples) spoke of his concern about duplication and in that context mentioned heavy lift. We in the alliance will be absolutely delighted to have duplication of heavy lift. When we took over the strategic defence review, one of the key areas on which we focused—indeed, one of the key deficiencies that we inherited—was a shortfall in heavy lift. We are making major efforts to rectify that in terms both of sea and air lift. The initiative echoes the principles that underpinned our strategic defence review. We are pleased about the emphasis on making European forces, including multinational forces, more effective.

We are also closely involved in the Western European Union's audit of European defence capability and aim to ensure that both initiatives are complementary, mutually supporting and, most importantly, result in a sustained drive to improve defence capability. I think that that is what Conservative Members should have concentrated on in their orations on Europe.

Washington marked the culmination of much of the work to create a European security and defence identity within the alliance. As has rightly been said, that was initiated by Michael Portillo when he was Defence Secretary at Berlin in 1996. The United Kingdom has been instrumental in establishing a programme to continue that development. Decisions taken at the summit will ensure that the European pillar of the alliance is a vital element in our drive to give Europe a greater voice in foreign and security policy.

As well as formally welcoming the three new NATO European members at the highest level, the summit clearly reaffirmed our commitment to future enlargement. We agreed positive language naming all nine current aspirants and stating their right to seek membership, backed up by practical advice and assistance in shaping membership action plans. There was also a meeting with countries from south-east Europe at which a consultative forum on security was established.

That puts the European security and defence initiative in its proper context. I was slightly surprised that the contributions of the Opposition spokesmen were dominated by that subject. It is an important issue but I understood the difficulty of the Conservatives, for whom everything seems to come back to Europe. They are like those who believe that the Freemasons, the Bilderberg group, the Rockefellers, or, in the good old days, the communists and Trotskyists, were the root of every problem. European issues are important but the balance must be got right.

Even discussing defence, the Conservatives talked as if there were a polarisation between the European defence industry and our relationship with the United States. However, British companies and defence industrial policy very much aim to get the best of both. In many ways, the consolidation of the European defence industry is designed to enable British and European industry not only more effectively to compete, but more effectively to collaborate, with American industry. We said that both in opposition and in government. The consolidation of the American industry means that it is necessary for us to match it that so that we can bring something to the table in discussions. That is understood not only by us but by our American partners.

At a recent conference addressed by me and the American Under-Secretary, John Hamre, it was asked whether we were creating fortress Europe. We are not. Equally, Fortress America is not a sensible option. We have to get the balance right. Equally, we have to consider consolidation of the European defence industry and that is already moving along, not only commercially but with the letter of intent.

There is also the harmonisation of requirements. Having a range of slightly different requirements for roughly similar products across Europe means that we get less effective military capability for the money that we spend and a less effective European defence industry. That is why I am pleased to draw the House's attention to a statement made today by my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State that the British Army will get the medium-range TRIGAT to provide its medium-range anti-tank guided weapons systems, in collaboration with France, Germany, the Netherlands and Belgium. Contracts will also be let for the project definition phase of the next generation light anti-armour weapon.

Those are important developments and part of the development of the European defence industry, because mutual dependency is becoming an increasing feature of defence equipment procurement. We need to recognise that and consider it within the context of, for example, discussions about Bishopton and Royal Ordnance. In the United Kingdom, there has been a reduction in orders for

[Mr. John Spellar]

ammunition from £300 million a year to about £70 million or £80 million a year. That is mirrored across Europe. To cope with that will require consolidation and specialisation but also assurance of supply, which requires mutual dependency. That cannot be done by companies alone; it will involve Governments. We need to do it within a co-operative framework and we must not be frightened about whether that is part of some overall Euro-plot. It is good business and sensible business, and good defence. So that debate will continue.

It is necessary to clarify for hon. Members what the European security and defence identity is about. It is not a question of competing with NATO. We have made that clear throughout negotiations with our allies and partners. St. Malo recognises that military capabilities for EU-led operations might be drawn from multinational or national sources outside the NATO framework. However, that merely reflects the fact that not all European capabilities that are currently answerable to the WEU are assigned to NATO.

We do not support the further development of military capabilities outside the NATO framework purely for use in EU operations. That is supported by the United States, which supports the impetus to create an ESDI. It has expressed concerns that were rightly identified by the hon. Member for Stratford-on-Avon and also our concerns that any moves should not result in decoupling, or lead to duplication or discrimination against NATO members that are not members of the EU. That is consistent with our approach.

We believe that Kosovo has demonstrated, not undermined, the enduring strength and value of the transatlantic alliance. It has also emphasised the need for Europe to play a stronger part in that alliance. I am sure that that is a cross-party view. The progress that was made on the initiative at last week's Cologne European Council capped a busy and productive spring. Rapid progress has been possible because the focus of the debate has been on practical requirements, not institutions—practical requirements for defence decision making in the EU and for strengthening European military capability. We are sure that that outcome will be good for NATO and for transatlantic relations.

There is a strand of opinion in the United States that questions whether the United States bears too much of the burden and whether Europe bears its share. We aim to ensure that Europe plays a full and active role.

My hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham, Edgbaston (Ms Stuart) stressed the need for Europe to be able to act. I have identified the ways in which we are developing that ability. She also rightly stressed the role of British leadership in Europe.

The hon. Member for Bournemouth, East (Mr. Atkinson) talked about ballistic missile defence technology. We are certainly not complacent, but we recognise, as I am sure that the hon. Gentleman does, that the technology is changing extremely rapidly. It would be premature at this stage to acquire such a capability because it might prove ineffective. However, we are monitoring developments on the risk posed by ballistic missiles and cruise missile technology and the technology available to counter them. We are participating in a NATO study and will work closely with our allies to inform further decisions. We are also aware of the considerable cost of ballistic missile defence and of the need to prioritise expenditure.

My hon. Friend the Member for Leyton and Wanstead (Mr. Cohen)—

Mr. Cohen: Before my hon. Friend comes on to me, may I comment on his response on ballistic missile defence technology? The one point that my hon. Friend missed out was that there is a treaty in existence. His missing it out implies that we would be prepared to agree with the United States that the treaty can be abrogated. Will he refer to that treaty?

Mr. Spellar: My hon. Friend should not draw that conclusion from what I said. I was talking about our interest in keeping in touch with, and considering, technology. We should have to consider treaty arrangements in parallel with that.

My hon. Friend helpfully read out not only his own views on several subjects, but the replies of my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State. That saved me a considerable amount of time. He also drew particularly helpful attention to the role of NATO, and especially of the UK, in retraining Russian officers to enable them to enter civilian life and find gainful employment. That has been of great assistance and has been much appreciated.

The hon. Member for New Forest, East started off with an interesting dissertation, which sounded for all the world like an Oxford seminar; I checked and found that he had attended that university and had been awarded a DPhil, so it was hardly surprising. I was most taken by his remark that he believed more strongly in defence than in a victory for one political party. From that, I draw the conclusion that he also believes in the need for a national defence policy. I shall deal with that later.

I was pleased that the hon. Gentleman had found the Commonwealth war graves internet site to be so useful. That site has been widely appreciated and heavily used. It has been of considerable help to many families. I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for mentioning it.

My hon. Friend the Member for Linlithgow (Mr. Dalyell) made a considerable number of extremely detailed points. He would not expect me to reply to all of them this evening, but I or another Minister will certainly reply to him in the near future.

The hon. Member for Ruislip-Northwood (Mr. Wilkinson) is not in his place, but told me that he would have to leave the Chamber before the end of the debate. Not surprisingly, he mentioned the importance of air operations and paid tribute—with which I am sure that we all agree—to the air crews who served over Kosovo.

The hon. Member for Portsmouth, South (Mr. Hancock) stressed the need for rebuilding in Kosovo. The hon. Member for Blaby (Mr. Robathan) also pointed out that a considerable of amount of such work would need to be done. I am sure that both hon. Gentlemen will be encouraged by the discussions on south-eastern European stability. There is a need to recreate civil society and organisation as well as the important job of physical reorganisation and building.

I was slightly surprised by the concern of the hon. Member for Portsmouth, South over procurement drop-back. I do not think that he really has read the answers to which he referred.

Mr. Hancock: I have.

Mr. Spellar: Perhaps the hon. Gentleman has not drawn the right conclusions. I should certainly be more than happy to discuss the matter with him if he has some particular concerns.

I was also slightly taken aback when he said that not enough was being done about recruitment. I fully accept that we need to make further improvements in retention, but the recruitment story is a very good one. In all the services, the advertising campaign has been extremely good—as have the activities of the recruiting teams, including the ethnic recruiting teams. Ministers and senior officers can keep sending out the message, but what really gets through to the young man or woman in the West Bromwich labour exchange—which I visited recently—is hearing what life is like in Her Majesty's forces from people from the many communities. Those people are our best salesmen and they are doing extremely well. We are proud of them and are pleased with the work that they undertake.

The hon. Gentleman said that the case of the nuclear test veterans had not been examined. The case has been extremely well examined. I regret that he does not accept the answers that we, and the best scientific advice, have come up with. The case has been considered by the National Radiological Protection Board, not once but twice. People are entitled to make criticisms, but if they do so from a scientific standpoint, they should do it in proper scientific papers. Those papers should be published in peer reviewed journals so that they can be subjected to the scientific method. That is what the NRPB has done and that is what anyone else who wants to undermine or attack its arguments should do.

The hon. Gentleman also mentioned those who have been afflicted with asbestosis and the other cancer that I always have difficulty pronouncing. He appeared to be speaking about civilian employees as well as service personnel, but my understanding is that civilian employees have all along been able to bring industrial injury compensation cases, and that the difficulty has been with service personnel, who have only more recently been able to bring such cases. I should be grateful if he would clarify that point.

Mr. Hancock: I was talking about both categories—civilian employees and service personnel. Service personnel never had that right before and they continue to have problems. Civilian employees have a problem of proof, because it is extremely difficult for them to gain access to documentation relating to their work, which in some cases was carried out 40 years ago. If a former dockyard employee spent his entire working career working for Her Majesty at the Royal Dockyard in Portsmouth, it should be obvious that the contamination came from that source. Such matters should be agreed in compensation cases but, sadly, they are not.

Mr. Spellar: I am sorry if there are such cases. My hon. Friend the Minister for the Armed Forces will consider such cases as part of his general review of the problem. I should have thought that it would have been easier for dockyard workers to demonstrate the source of contamination than, for example, some of the people with whom I used to deal as a union official: contract workers on the Clyde who moved from company to company and were never formally employed in the shipyards. They had to get attestations from people who had worked with them or from employers, but the companies involved no longer existed. If there are unreasonable difficulties, I should be grateful if the hon. Gentleman brought them to our attention and they will be examined.

Like other hon. Members, the hon. Gentleman spoke about the role of the Territorial Army. The hon. Member for Mid-Norfolk referred to the 10 per cent. who are already serving in Bosnia, and we value their role. I have visited TA units and I know that, in some areas, there was disappointment about some of the decisions that had been made; however, other units that were receiving new equipment and could see their future role felt a sense of excitement and renewed interest. The picture is more balanced than has been said and we do the TA no service by ignoring that.

My hon. Friend the Member for Wentworth (Mr. Healey) spoke about the refugees and the work in the camps. A few weeks ago, I was down in Maidstone with the Royal Engineers. All of us—in fact, the world in general—have been hugely impressed by the speed and professionalism with which they erected new camps for refugees. We remember seeing on television the tide of refugees coming across the border. The speed with which that apparent chaos was resolved by getting the refugees into proper camps where they had proper feeding facilities is a tremendous tribute to our personnel, who have continued to work in other camps. That demonstrates the role played by our armed forces in that region.

My hon. Friend mentioned defence diplomacy, which we stress strongly. In the former Soviet Union and in eastern Europe, our military personnel have undertaken a great deal of work, in particular to enable the transformation and evolution of the military in those areas. I have already referred to the retraining work in Russia.

My hon. Friend also referred to the campaign by the International Labour Organisation in respect of 18-year-olds and under-18s in the armed forces. In correspondence with him and other hon. Members, Ministers have set out the reasons why our recruitment policies are as they are. It should be stressed that the real difficulty with the recruitment of young people relates to those who are snatched and forcibly conscripted, either into armed forces, especially those of third world countries, or into paramilitary organisations and roving bands. There is a world of difference between such people and those who have been recruited in proper circumstances, with the consent of their parents, with the option to leave at certain stages, and with a whole range of other protections. We should not confuse the issues.

My hon. Friend the Member for Harrow, East raised one or two procurement issues. We were spared on this occasion questioning by my hon. F the Member for Alyn and Deeside (Mr. Jones) who usually asks about that subject. My hon. Friend the Member for Harrow, East informed me that he had to leave the Chamber, and I will write to him about the matters that he raised.

[Mr. Spellar]

I draw hon. Members' attention to the question of resources and expenditure, particularly in terms of the Kosovo operation. That matter has been raised previously—although not in this debate. Expenditure to the end of May totalled £43 million compared with £37 million to the end of April. That is actual additional expenditure and does not include committed expenditure or the cost of expended ordnance. I thought it useful and important to give those figures to the House tonight.

Kosovo is but the latest and most dramatic example of the wide range of activities undertaken by Britain's defence in the world. First, the Government's commitment to make Britain a force for good in the world is no empty promise. We continue to have worldwide interests and worldwide influence, as well as a huge number of British nationals around the world. Furthermore, the dedication and professionalism of British forces is known and admired across the globe.

Mr. Hancock: How do the Government propose to support the President of Montenegro and his democratically elected Government, who will be subjected to enormous pressure from Milosevic and his regime now that he does not have Kosovo to boss around? Will NATO and the Ministry of Defence give support to the President and his regime?

Mr. Spellar: As I have told the hon. Gentleman, we are concerned about stability in south-east Europe and in the Balkans. As we pointed out to those who were critical of our operations in Kosovo, Milosevic's recent actions were simply the last in a long line of atrocities perpetrated by him and his regime. The countries of Europe—particularly the countries of the region—are anxious to put a stop to that instability and those atrocities. That view is shared by the international community. The hon. Gentleman will have noticed that the Serbian forces retreated into Serbia—and that was indicated clearly in the documentation.

Secondly, our forces' successes have displayed their capabilities and proved that their effectiveness is second to none. Hon. Members will not be surprised if I join all of those who have this evening paid tribute to our forces. We are not unusual in doing so. One has only to talk to a hurricane victim in central America, a Kosovar refugee or a service man from another country to understand why our armed services are held in such high regard across the world.

Thirdly, while we have rightly heard about the difficulties associated with our forces' levels of activity, we should not forget the up side—to which the hon. Member for Blaby drew attention. As he knows, our service personnel are never more satisfied than when they are actively engaged on operations: when they know that they are doing the job they are trained for and making a real difference to the world.

Mr. Robathan: I am sorry to interrupt the Minister, but I am listening carefully to his speech. British personnel also want to return to their families and have time off at some stage.

Mr. Spellar: We certainly understand that. That is why the Secretary of State has introduced several policies that will make the services more family friendly and help our armed forces personnel to move more easily into the outside world when they finish their service. The adult learning services have provided a great advantage. I visited RAF Cosford two or three weeks ago and I talked to several service men who are taking part in training using their training credits. They greatly appreciate that opportunity, which not only adds to their value to us but gives them portable skills to use in the outside world.

As hon. Members know, the new format of the defence debates, which differs from the previous single-service debates, was devised as a result of a bipartisan discussion about how we could more effectively debate defence roles in the Chamber. I think that it is working, and it will no doubt evolve.

The format raises a deeper issue, to which I alluded when I referred to the speech by the hon. Member for New Forest, East. In the previous Parliament, my colleagues and I argued repeatedly that we needed a more mature and consensual approach on defence matters. For reasons that I shall not go into tonight, the Conservatives did not take that up. We repeated that request from the Government Benches and attempted to accommodate other opinions in the strategic defence review process. Many hon. Members on both sides of the House who take an interest in defence have responded, and we shall continue our endeavours to change the way in which we deal with defence issues. That will be good for Parliament, it will be good for the country and, most importantly, it is the right thing to do for the men and women keeping watch tonight in the hills of the Balkans.

Question put and negatived.

COMMITTEES

Ordered,

Public Accounts

That Mr. Derek Twigg be discharged from the Committee of Public Accounts and Mr. Barry Gardiner be added to the Committee.—*[Mr. Jamieson.]*

Ordered,

Public Administration

That Dr Lynda Clark, Mr. Fraser Kemp and Mr. Rhodri Morgan be discharged from the Select Committee on Public Administration and Mr. Desmond Browne, Mr. Brian White and Dr Tony Wright be added to the Committee.—*[Mr. Jamieson.]*

Scottish Borders (EU Structural Funds)

Motion made, and Question proposed, That this House do now adjourn.—*[Mrs. McGuire.]*

6.51 pm

Mr. Archy Kirkwood (Roxburgh and Berwickshire): I am pleased to be able to follow the wide-ranging debate that the House has just had on the important issues on defence in the world. I make no apologies for trying to refocus the attention of the House on the important issues facing the Scottish borders in relation to the distribution of the next programme of European Union structural funds. It would be difficult to exaggerate how important that is to south-east Scotland.

Before I embark on the main body of my remarks, I state my hope that, if my hon. Friend the Member for Tweeddale, Ettrick and Lauderdale (Mr. Moore) catches your eye, Mr. Deputy Speaker, you will allow him to contribute briefly to the debate.

This is an appropriate day for a debate on European funding because we are having a European election, and the importance of the European Parliament in distributing structural funds in future is an essential part of the political argument that has been raging—or not, as the case may be—in the campaign.

Will the Minister say a few words about the consultation process that has been undertaken in recent weeks? Will that process continue? I fully understand that he may not be able to say as much as he would like because the consultation process has to be concluded, and we look forward to that. I heard a rumour, however, that there were early indications of proposed lists that might be published in the next few weeks. Will the Minister comment on that, if he can? I do not seek state secrets, although if he would like to reveal any state secrets, I should be quite happy to hear them. If he has any advance information about that consultation process, it would be good if he could put the Government's position on record.

If the Minister has an opportunity to have constructive meetings with colleagues, then no doubt colleagues not only from south-east Scotland but throughout the world will be beating a path to his door. Such meetings would be useful, and my hon. Friend the Member for Tweeddale, Ettrick and Lauderdale and I would like to underline the earlier request for a meeting that we made in a letter.

As I said, it is difficult to exaggerate the importance of this issue to the future economic well-being of the Scottish borders region. The next programme of European funding will run from 2000 to 2006. Before I turn, briefly, to that programme, I shall, even more briefly, refer to the situation in the remainder of the current funding year.

The Scottish borders is coming to the end of a very constructive and important period of objective 5b funding. I would argue that the money that we have received since 1994—a crucial £24 million or £25 million—has been put to very good effect. The benefits are there for all to see. I hope that, in the remaining months of the current period, we will be able to make the best use of what money there is, and, in the dying days of the existing programme, construct a bridge between it and the new programme, which will take us into objective 2 territory once the reforms are implemented on 1 January next year.

The Secretary of State and, indeed, the Under-Secretary, have said that they will use their good offices to divert at the last minute any unallocated funds from other parts of the country. A carefully worked out and detailed programme in the borders would put any unallocated funds that the Under-Secretary might be able to find to very good use. Ministers promised to do their best. I understand that the task is not easy, but anything that the Under-Secretary might be able to say about the process would be extremely valuable to local people, who would then know whether the projects on which they have worked will be confirmed and can proceed. That would be a very valuable bridge from the current programme, as it winds down, to the new one.

We all know that, under the new set-up, objective 2 funds are designed to try to deal with a process of conversion in areas of the European Community that are suffering difficulties. They are supposed to address difficulties in areas facing economic change in manufacturing or service industries, or changing social backgrounds. Declining rural areas are particularly mentioned as targets for objective 2 work over the next six years, and—appositely for the coastal communities in Berwickshire that I represent—depressed fishing areas are specifically referred to as deserving help. Such factors are important and all applicable in diverse ways to south-east Scotland, which puts us in a good position to qualify for objective 2 help.

In passing, I again congratulate the Government on the cushion of the safety net, as a result of which the amount of money available under the current objective 5b status may be reduced only by a maximum of one third. That is a valuable cushion, of which I hope we shall make very good use.

As the Under-Secretary will know, any area of the United Kingdom cannot automatically or easily meet the core criteria. To that extent, the deal was bad for the UK. There is no automatic eligibility for areas such as south-east Scotland, although I would argue that the Scottish borders area has a very good case in many respects. However—I underline this—we need central Government support. Co-operation at ministerial and official level between the Scottish Office and our professionals in the local enterprise company and the local authority has been excellent, and we are grateful for that, but we need some political support from the Government—and we need it now.

I have two or three further points to make—none of them will be new to the Government or the Under-Secretary because they are well aware of the case that has been submitted. I endorse the excellent written submission made by the local enterprise company and the local authority. I shall highlight one or two points of the submission in reinforcing the case.

I should like the Government to look particularly at the new work being done by the Centre for Educational Sociology at Edinburgh university, because it has identified something that I did not realise. The reason why local unemployment is artificially low is that such a high proportion of young people leave the area just after leaving school. Given that many would not find jobs if they stayed in the area, unemployment would be higher than the Scottish average if such people were added to the count. That important factor is argued at some length in the official submission.

[Mr. Archy Kirkwood]

Secondly, I draw attention to the part of the submission about difficulties facing agriculture, given that 33.3 per cent. of businesses in south-east Scotland in 1996 were based on the primary sector. That is a crucial factor for us.

My hon. Friend the Member for Tweeddale, Ettrick and Lauderdale and I spent Monday afternoon with people from our local National Farmers Union, and they reinforced the fact that was clearly shown in the local authority survey conducted earlier this year—that the agricultural sector in south-east Scotland is having a very difficult time.

It being Seven o'clock, the motion for the Adjournment of the House lapsed, without Question put.

Motion made, and Question proposed, That this House do now adjourn.—*[Mrs. McGuire.]*

Mr. Kirkwood: I have only one more point to make, and I was trying to get it in before 7 o'clock, but I failed.

I want to draw attention to fisheries, because the new objective 2 schemes provide us with a new opportunity to help distressed fishing areas. According to the figures that we have worked out locally, between 10 and 15 per cent. of the Berwickshire travel-to-work area depends on fish landing and processing, and the ancillary sectors.

I know that the Minister is an expert on some of the relevant issues, and realises how important fishing is to coastal communities. Landings of fish at Eyemouth have slumped in the past 10 years from 8,000 tonnes to 5,000 tonnes, according to figures produced in the past few months. That is a worrying trend, and I think that objective 2 funds could address the problem constructively if we use them properly.

The Scottish Office working party report did valuable work in identifying what needs to be done, and came to the conclusion that, in terms of trying to deliver that programme for the future, it was important that continued access to European structural funding should be continued in some way and at some level into the new programme.

Objective 2 status for the whole of the Scottish borders is a crucial target for us, and I hope that we can count on the Government's support in trying to achieve that end.

7.1 pm

Mr. Michael Moore (Tweeddale, Ettrick and Lauderdale): I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Roxburgh and Berwickshire (Mr. Kirkwood) for inviting me to contribute to this short debate, and I also thank the Minister for agreeing to my participation.

Most of the key points have already been made by my hon. Friend, and I shall reinforce some of them. In particular, I must emphasise the grim couple of years that we have had in the borders, with thousands of job losses and the widespread collapse of farm incomes, which affects nearly every significant sector of the local economy.

We have had many responses from the local enterprise company, the council and the Government—a contribution that my hon. Friend and I have been more than willing to acknowledge in the past, and I am happy to acknowledge it again. The partnership between the different political parties and the different agencies has worked, and we are keen for it to continue.

It is evident to all of us that we need to continue with the diversification of the borders economy and ensure long-term support both for new industries and for the many successful continuing businesses in key sectors such as textiles. In that context, the continuing availability of structural funds for the borders, and winning back assisted area status, will be critical.

My hon. Friend mentioned the borders working party report, which was published as recently as March. It is a solid document with real proposals and good pointers for the future. I want to draw the Minister's attention to two or three of those. On page 7 it is acknowledged that

"The availability of European money has been extremely important to the Borders"

over the past few years. The report continues:

"The Government is . . . committed to reallocating unused European structural funds for use in the Borders."

Like my hon. Friend, I hope that the Minister will—if not this evening, soon—be able to respond to our concerns and perhaps honour the pledge made to the borders in that respect.

The most important section in the working party report states:

"The Working Party believes that the availability of European new Objective 2 funding will be crucial to the rebuilding of the Borders economy and any reduction or removal of European funding could have a serious adverse effect on the timetable for carrying forward initiatives and achieving the objectives"—

that is, the objectives of the new economic strategy.

The report puts things clearly and eloquently, and I endorse what it says.

A number of the factors that will be difficult for us have already been mentioned and I do not want to repeat too much of what my hon. Friend has said. One such factor is the migration of young people. We have a growing population, but that is accounted for largely by the commuter belt around Edinburgh and by the increasing numbers of retired people, who are welcome in the borders but are masking the underlying trend of young people leaving the area.

We hope that the Government can continue to support our case and will recognise that, with our rurality—ours is the second most sparsely populated area in the United Kingdom after the highlands and islands—and our industrial dependency, which, paradoxically, is the second highest in Scotland, and with 2,500 jobs lost already in the past couple of years, matters are serious and need to be addressed.

My hon. Friend the Member for Roxburgh and Berwickshire and I will go to Brussels on Monday to speak to the European Commission about these very issues. We hope that we take with us Government support and can be assured of on-going efforts on their part to secure new objective 2 status. We have seen already that the Government have recognised the problems of the borders and we hope that, in on-going representations to Europe, they will support us in seeking some of the solutions.

7.6 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Scotland (Mr. Calum Macdonald): I congratulate the hon. Member for Roxburgh and Berwickshire (Mr. Kirkwood) on securing the debate. I also congratulate both him and the hon. Member for Tweeddale, Ettrick and Lauderdale (Mr. Moore) on their contributions to consideration of the important matter of European structural funds and the borders. It is not the first time that we have debated the subject. I pay tribute to the way in which both hon. Gentlemen articulated the interests of their constituents in what is obviously a difficult time for the borders area.

As has been said, structural funds have played their part in contributing to economic development in the borders and in Scotland. The benefits are already clear across the whole of the borders area, and we can expect further benefits to flow over the next few years as projects mature and as their longer-term aims are realised.

Both hon. Gentlemen raised two principal concerns—the current borders objective 5b programme and whether additional funding can be found for that, and the prospects for the area in the next round under objective 2.

Structural fund assistance was introduced to the borders as a result of the previous reform, way back in 1993. At the time, the programme partnership, which includes all the local agencies, was unanimously of the view that the level of EC resources provided for the borders programme was inadequate to meet the needs of the area. Although strong arguments for additional resources were then advanced, nothing was done. All eligible areas had been allocated funding based on an agreed set of criteria already used for disbursement of objective 5b funds.

In recognition of the serious impact of recent job losses in the area, the new Government made a commitment last year to try to find unspent EC resources to allocate specifically to the borders, and we intend to deliver on that commitment. On the basis of the Government's commitment, the borders objective 5b partnership drew up a mini-programme, as the hon. Member for Roxburgh and Berwickshire mentioned, based on immediate and longer-term need, with the expectation that additional EC resources would be made available at some stage before the end of 1999. The necessary processes take time, and they are still continuing as I speak.

Officials in the Scottish Office Development Department approached various project sponsors towards the end of 1998 and again in February of this year, to establish precisely what the projected spend profiles would be in their various projects. The exercise involved a review of the forecast financial uptake of projects approved to date, together with an accurate assessment of what was likely to come forward for structural fund support during the remainder of 1999.

That exercise concluded that £2.2 million could be reallocated for use by the borders to advance the projects approved by the programme monitoring committee as contained within the mini-programme, and I am pleased to be able to confirm the Government's intention to reallocate that funding.

The process of transferring funds will take a little time as it has to be cleared by the European Commission, although we do not have any reason to suspect objections or difficulties with what we propose. In the meantime, the borders project sponsors will be allowed to proceed with those projects approved subject to the availability of funds, but at this stage it must be at their own risk, given that final approval is in the hands of the Commission.

I have no doubt that the additional EC funds to be made available to the borders, together with an equivalent amount of co-finance from the various public sector authorities, which together amount to a package of more than £4 million, will be of significant assistance to the area. As the hon. Member for Roxburgh and Berwickshire said, the Government promised to find the money last year in recognition of the special problems of the borders. We are sticking by that promise and are well on the way to delivering.

Let me deal with the future of structural funds after the current programme period finishes in December. Briefly to set the context, member states largely signed up to the Commission's broad aims of concentration, simplification and preparing the way for a much-enlarged European Union. However, although we accept that concentration inevitably means reduced coverage for existing member states, we were determined that that should be achieved in a fair and even-handed way among all member states.

For the UK, as has been pointed out, that presented a particular challenge. At the time of the last allocation of structural funds, in the early 1990s, UK unemployment was extremely high and the UK was in the grip of a serious recession. As a consequence of that high unemployment and other factors, the UK received extensive coverage under objective 2.

The picture in the late 1990s and as we head into the next century is very different. The new Government have achieved the lowest levels of unemployment in 22 years. Low unemployment would inevitably mean dramatically reduced coverage of objective 2, unless the UK could negotiate an alternative. That is why the Prime Minister proposed and pushed so hard for a safety net. Securing that safety net in respect of objective 2 was a priority every bit as great for the Government as getting a good deal on the highlands and islands, although it may have received less press attention.

The Prime Minister won his argument on the safety net at the Berlin summit at the end of March. The safety net delivers for the UK as a whole much larger coverage of objective 2 than would otherwise have been available. It doubles the population coverage that we would otherwise have got, from 6.5 million to 13.5 million people.

Having secured the safety net, we must allocate that coverage fairly within the UK, and in a way that is acceptable to the Commission. The first step in that process has been to engage in wide public consultation, as has been mentioned, on objective 2 coverage. That consultation finished on 25 May, and we have been considering carefully the range of submissions received.

The next step is for the Government to propose a list of areas to the Commission. It is intended that that should be done in July, but it is likely to take three or four months before final agreement is reached between the Government and the Commission on the list of designated areas.

As soon as there is a definitive list of eligible areas, decisions can be taken by Ministers in the new Scottish Executive on the mechanics of operating the new programmes. Clearly, the final level of eligibility will be significant in determining programme areas and committee structures.

[Mr. Calum Macdonald]

In the interim, however, time will be used constructively. Plan teams in Scotland have been established and have met regularly since the beginning of March to do the preparatory work needed for drafting new programmes. Although the eligible areas obviously remain unknown, it is still possible to undertake much of the economic analyses and priority setting in advance, particularly as all areas currently eligible will receive transition funding at the very least.

Again, it is thanks to the Prime Minister that we shall have six years' transition for all areas losing eligibility, instead of the four years proposed by the Commission for current objective 2 and 5b areas. That will allow all areas the opportunity to develop strategies over a reasonable time scale, even if they fail to qualify for full funding in the new round.

Given the future realities of enlargement, it is important to remember that these may well be the last available structural funds for most of Scotland, whether in transition or fully eligible, and that future eligibility will be concentrated on the areas in greatest need. All partners must accept that, in view of the future concentration, there will inevitably be areas that lose eligibility. With reduced funding available to a smaller population, the emphasis must be on targeting the most deprived areas.

I understand how the borders area is placed, and how the eligibility criteria in the regulations affect its relatively high dependence on the industrial sector, the discernible decline in industrial employment, the sparse population, the out-migration that was mentioned, the high proportion of agricultural employment and the fisheries dependency around Eyemouth or the Berwickshire coast. As has been said, those factors are well brought out in the case submitted by Scottish Borders council.

I appreciate the fact that partners in the borders, along with many others, are concerned about the likelihood of future funding under objective 2. Obviously, I cannot give any assurances at this stage in the process, but I can promise that careful attention is being given both to the cases submitted by areas and to the data available to the Government. The Government will look carefully and hard at the relative and respective merits of the cases put forward and will use open and transparent criteria for the final selection.

Finally, I emphasise the importance of the role of the partners in the borders, and any other area in Scotland which is pursuing objective 2 funding. They know the local priorities and local problems best, and it is for them to develop and implement exit strategies accordingly. It is for the partners to ensure that they make the best possible use of whatever funding they secure, be it objective 2, objective 3, transitional or rural diversification funding.

I hope that what I have said has been helpful to the hon. Members for Roxburgh and Berwickshire and for Tweeddale, Ettrick and Lauderdale and their constituents, and that this evening's announcement will be positively received in the borders.

Question put and agreed to.

Adjourned accordingly at sixteen minutes past Seven o'clock.

House of Commons

Friday 11 June 1999

The House met at half-past Nine o'clock

PRAYERS

[MADAM SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

Orders of the Day

Football (Offences and Disorder) Bill

As amended in the Standing Committee, considered

New Clause 1

AVAILABILITY OF INTERNATIONAL FOOTBALL BANNING ORDER IN RESPECT OF UNCONVICTED PERSONS

'(1) An application for an order under section 1 of this Act may be made by a relevant authority if it appears to the authority, in relation to any person, that making the order would help to prevent violence or disorder at or in connection with designated football matches.

(2) In this section "relevant authority" means any chief officer of police.

(3) Where an order is made under this section, the court may, if it thinks fit, impose such conditions in the order as may be imposed where an order is made in respect of a person who has been convicted of a relevant offence.'.—*[Mr. Maclean.]*

Brought up, and read the First time.

9.34 am

Mr. David Maclean (Penrith and The Border): I beg to move, That the clause be read a Second time.

Madam Speaker: With this, it will be convenient to discuss the following: New clause 2—*Availability of domestic football banning order in respect of unconvicted persons*—

'(1) An application for an order under section 6 of this Act may be made by a relevant authority if it appears to the authority, in relation to any person, that making the order would help to prevent violence or disorder at or in connection with prescribed football matches.

(2) In this section "relevant authority" means any chief officer of police.'.

Amendment No. 33, in clause 1, page 1, line 11, after 'offence', insert

'or to which an application has been made under section (*Availability of international football banning order in respect of unconvicted persons*).'.

Amendment No. 34, in page 1, line 18, after 'accused', insert

'or to the person who is the subject of an application under section (*Availability of international football banning order in respect of unconvicted persons*).'.

Amendment No. 35, in page 1, line 23, after 'accused', insert

'or to the person who is the subject of an application under section (*Availability of international football banning order in respect of unconvicted persons*).'.

Amendment No. 36, in page 2, line 5, after 'conditionally', insert '; or

(c) following an application under section (*Availability of international football banning order in respect of unconvicted persons*).'.

Amendment No. 37, in clause 4, page 6, line 12, at end insert—

'(1C) Subject to subsection (3) and section 17 below, an international football banning order has effect in relation to a person who is the subject of an application made under section (*Availability of international football banning order in respect of unconvicted persons*) for a period determined by the court making the order—

(a) which begins with the date of the making of the order;

(b) which is not longer than 3 years; and

(c) which is not shorter than six months.'.

Amendment No. 38, in clause 6, page 7, line 24, after 'applies', insert

'or to which an application has been made under section (*Availability of domestic football banning order in respect of unconvicted persons*).'.

Amendment No. 39, in page 7, line 34, after 'accused', insert

'or to the person who is the subject of an application under section (*Availability of domestic football banning order in respect of unconvicted persons*).'.

Amendment No. 40, in page 7, line 39, after 'accused', insert

'or to the person who is the subject of an application under section (*Availability of domestic football banning order in respect of unconvicted persons*).'.

Amendment No. 41, in page 8, line 2, after 'conditionally', insert & ; or

(c) following an application under section (*Availability of domestic football banning order in respect of unconvicted persons*).'.

Amendment No. 42, in clause 8, page 9, line 12, after 'years', insert

', except in respect of persons who are the subject of an application under section (*Availability of domestic football banning order in respect of unconvicted persons*), in which case the period shall be not less than six months nor more than two years.'.

Mr. Maclean: This is an important group of new clauses and amendments. New clauses 1 and 2 seek to bring into legislative effect the suggestions made by my hon. Friend the Member for West Chelmsford (Mr. Burns) on Second Reading. The Bill has not been amended much in Committee. However, it relates entirely to those who have been convicted of offences. The clause concerning international football banning orders relates to those who have been convicted, as does the clause on domestic banning orders.

As was said extensively on Second Reading, there might be a great many people whom football intelligence officers, the National Criminal Intelligence Service and chief police officers know to be dedicated troublemakers who can be violent, but who have not been convicted of an offence.

I intend to explain why it is important to explore the possibility of including that group, and I am keen to hear the reaction of the Government. I do not intend to force the new clause to a vote, but it is worth exploring, as the Bill—which does some good things—could leave some serious gaps. With the Euro 2000 championships coming up, it is important that we do not have gaps in legislation.

[Mr. Maclean]

I am conscious that making the changes that I am suggesting may unsettle or destabilise the Bill. I am conscious also that the new clause probably has not been thoroughly drafted, but it is not a bad attempt. However, certain technical amendments might be necessary if the new clause were to be accepted.

The Bill deals with convicted people. Bolting on a new clause—even one which is in order—concerning unconvicted people may destabilise the thrust of the Bill. It may be better in due course for the Government to propose separate legislation—or, if they wish, to propose a series of new clauses in the other place to frame in legislation the intended purpose of the new clause.

The amendments grouped with the new clauses are consequential. Both new clauses propose to do the same thing, essentially. New clause 1 relates to international banning orders, and refers to

"any chief officer of police".

I am happy to accept under that description chief constables, the Commissioner of the Metropolitan police—who is not technically a chief police officer, but a civilian appointment—and the director-general of NCIS, who is a chief officer of police rank. It is important that the director-general of NCIS be included, as NCIS ran the football intelligence unit and is spearheading the effort against violence perpetrated by hooligans in this country and overseas. The new clause would include also the Commissioner of the City of London police.

I want to give those officers the power to apply the measure in relation to "any person". I must use that phraseology, because I mean "any person"—including those who have not necessarily been convicted of a relevant offence. That would include all those whom the officers suspected, because of evidence or intelligence, of being involved in football hooliganism or violence, or indecent chanting or racist abuse at matches—the troublemakers whom they are currently monitoring—as well as those who had been taken to court but not convicted. I will say more later about the civil liberties implications, which may worry some people of a more sensitive disposition.

The power would appear to be draconian, but an order would not be imposed merely on the say-so of a chief officer; he would have to apply to the court. The new clause does not specify what level of evidence would be necessary to satisfy the court. It may be difficult to determine what level of evidence would be appropriate to secure an order without jeopardising police operations.

A similar proposal was in the Government's consultation paper on football-related legislation. The Minister said in Committee that she was interested in the concept, but that the Bill might not offer the right opportunity and the Government might want to explore the idea further at a later stage. The proposal was dropped after consultation because it aroused considerable controversy.

Some of the respondents were concerned about what would constitute sufficient evidence and others were concerned that courts might be presented with hearsay evidence. I do not rate that point very highly because that danger exists at present and the court would always rule such evidence out of order. It is up to the court whether it believes a police officer who says that he saw someone doing something. In the case of an unconvicted person, the evidence presented might not be enough to gain a conviction but it might satisfy the court that the person had committed some acts that merited the imposition of a domestic or international banning order.

I am more concerned about the risk of intelligence information being compromised, although I am sure that we can get round that. We will not go into the details of how NCIS operates. I would not go further than its press release on its football intelligence unit and the operation of its local football intelligence officers in each force. All one can say is that it is highly effective.

It was my experience during Euro 96 that the intelligence-run policing operation conducted by all police forces and co-ordinated by the Met was absolutely superb. Many people—some of them, sadly, from my own patch, north of Penrith, in Carlisle—got tooled up, got into their minibus, set off to have a good ruckus and were very much surprised when they were intercepted along the route by the police and the pickaxe handles, knives, chains and bottles were taken off them and they were locked up.

The same expression of surprise was seen on the faces of miscellaneous foreign supporters who boarded planes, got to Heathrow, passed through customs and immigration and then were intercepted by the police because of the football intelligence work of overseas police officers attached to the co-ordination unit at the Met and NCIS. Intelligence-led policing works. We were able to deport those foreign hooligans immediately as well as prevent our domestic ones from getting to matches. The fact that they were detained in cells overnight and could not get to matches was highly effective.

9.45 am

Such intelligence-led policing depends on the knowledge of NCIS and local police officers of who the troublemakers are. The new clause is designed to build on that operation and allow us, rather than merely detaining the hooligans in a cell overnight or questioning them for a few hours so that they miss the match, to go one step further and present information to a court, perhaps with video evidence.

I am conscious that presenting video evidence to a court could compromise intelligence, so it must be left to the police and NCIS to decide how much evidence to give, taking into account the risk that if they do not give the court sufficient information—if all they have are rumours, gut reaction or a bobby's instinct—they will not get the banning order. We do not need to prescribe too much detail in legislation.

I do not see too great a risk of intelligence being compromised. I would leave it to the good sense of the police to keep their intelligence sources intact, as there are much more valuable gains to be had in the long run with convictions of some of the nastiest hooligans, which must be a more pressing concern than gaining a banning order against one individual.

The new clause has aroused some concerns about the scope for civil actions against the police on the grounds of their presenting uncorroborated information to the court. Certainly, that is a risk. It is possible that people may claim to have been defamed by the police. If the police have laid information before the court about an innocent

member of the public—innocent in the sense both of the person being unconvicted and of the information being wrong—there would of course be scope for action, but it would not be any greater than the present scope for action against the police on a whole range of, in my opinion, bogus issues. The number of law suits against the police is rocketing. It has become the newest and juiciest racket for getting money from the state. A group of lawyers has no doubt moved on from medical negligence cases to action against the police.

Probably the greatest concern is about civil liberties, and some of my more sensitive colleagues may want to speak about that. I have not had unanimous, wholehearted supported from them for the new clause, although I am sure that my hon. Friend the Member for West Chelmsford will want to support me this morning.

Some of my hon. Friends may say that the new clause is a sledgehammer to crack a nut. They may think that it is disproportionate to the mischief being created, and that we would be passing draconian measures in providing that some people who have not been convicted of an offence may be banned from travelling overseas, or may be subject to a whole host of sanctions imposed by the courts.

Subsection (3) would allow those sanctions. It states:

"Where an order is made under this section, the court may, if it thinks fit, impose such conditions in the order as may be imposed where an order is made in respect of a person who has been convicted of a relevant offence."

My new clause would give the courts the right to impose the same range of penalties and restrictions—including passport removal—on those who have not been convicted as they may already impose on those who have been convicted.

I appreciate the civil liberties concerns about such a provision, but we should remember that—thank goodness—we are not dealing with hundreds of thousands of people. Although I am not arguing that it is acceptable to remove the civil liberties of even one person, the fact is that we are dealing with a few hundred or—at the very most—a few thousand dangerous hooligans, whose civil liberties will not be removed on the whim of a police officer or a chief police officer. Their civil liberties would simply be restricted on the basis of evidence presented to the court that they would be a danger and might cause violence if they were to go to a football match. The courts would be able to decide whether to grant an order, and what conditions to impose. I do not think that such restrictions are extremely draconian.

Restricting someone's freedom of movement and travel is, of course, a potentially severe measure. I should therefore be very keen to hear the Minister's views on whether my proposals—or an amended version of them—would satisfy the requirements of the European convention on human rights. I realise that—as the Government have not seriously contemplated including my new clause in the Bill today—the Minister may not have taken legal advice on its compliance with the ECHR. However, if she has a view on whether we may be on dangerous ground in relation to the ECHR, the House would be interested to hear it. Nevertheless, I think that it should be possible for a court to restrict someone's freedom of movement and travel within the European Union without falling foul of the ECHR.

My proposals are not totally new or off the wall, as there are some precedents for imposing an order in cases in which an offence has not been committed. Anti-social behaviour orders, for example—which were introduced in the Crime and Disorder Act 1998—allow a court to impose any prohibitions considered necessary to protect persons in the local area.

Incidentally, during that Act's passage, the official Opposition tabled an amendment to introduce football behaviour orders in cases in which a person had acted in such a way as reasonably to give cause to believe that an order was necessary to prevent him from disturbing good order at any designated football match outside the United Kingdom, or during the period before or after any designated football match. The amendment was not pressed to a Division—as some of my colleagues were merely testing the water—and was withdrawn.

I am, therefore, not on entirely new ground in suggesting that it is appropriate to go to a court to obtain an order restricting the freedom of movement of an individual who has not been convicted of an offence in cases in which there is evidence suggesting that the person is a troublemaker or likely to commit violence.

As other hon. Members wish to speak, I shall not go on for too much longer. I merely wish to draw attention to some of the NCIS statistics on football violence and disorder, some of which were quoted on Second Reading. The NCIS view on the matter is very important. In its December 1998 press release, NCIS said:

"The National Criminal Intelligence Service today warned that they were becoming increasingly concerned about the number of incidents of football hooliganism being reported by their football section and by the network of FIOs"—

football intelligence officers.

Bryan Drew went on to say:

"Although it is too early to say that the overall downward trend for football-related arrest figures over the past five years is being reversed, the signs are not encouraging."

He was referring to the fact that, although the overall figures for football-related offences and convictions had been dropping, he had noticed that there were more arrests for the more violent football-related offences of affray, violent disorder and missile throwing. He said that those had

"shown a marked increase over the previous season."

Bryan Drew continued:

"This season, the ugly face of football hooliganism has continued to make its unwelcome presence felt. The numbers of people involved remain comparatively small, but it is hard core, well organised and hellbent on causing mayhem. It is using football matches as a cover for its criminal activities."

Mr. Drew went on to talk about the fact that, although incidents of violence were declining inside the grounds, they were increasing outside or away from them.

On Second Reading, when I stated that statistics showed about 1,000 arrests for football-related violence, Labour Members made the point that that number could be only the tip of the iceberg. I accept that, usually, the majority of those committing a crime are not arrested and convicted. So it is quite possible that many hardcore football hooligans have not been arrested by police, or that, if they have been, the evidence was not sufficient to obtain a conviction or—under clauses 1 or 6 of the Bill—a banning order.

My new clause would permit police, in limited circumstances, to take action against those other well-known offenders—whom every Opposition Member

[Mr. Maclean]

talks about; they know who they are—who regularly follow football matches and foment violence, but manage to be on the back line when police move in to make arrests. The police have information and video evidence on those people. In many cases, police may have sufficient evidence to convince a court—in the terms of my new clause, although they may not have enough evidence to obtain a conviction—that the liberty of those people should be restricted.

New clause 1 is worthy of an airing, and I should be interested to hear what my hon. Friend the Member for West Chelmsford has to say about it. I was very interested in his comments, some time ago, on the potential for such a new clause. I should also be interested to hear why he has resiled from the tough stance that he proposed taking on such a provision. I am sure that he wants as many of these hooligans locked up—or at least prevented from causing trouble overseas, ruining the good name of Chelmsford and other parts of the United Kingdom—as I do.

As my hon. Friend the Member for West Chelmsford says:

"For far too long, a small minority of mindless, moronic football hooligans have besmirched the reputation of football in this country and dragged the game into the gutter by their anti-social behaviour."

My hon. Friend knows the rest of his press release. He was suggesting taking tough action to deal with those people.

I hope that, today, my hon. Friend will tell me that tough action will indeed be taken. If he cannot accept my new clause, I hope that he will he go away and—as he has been working very closely with the Minister, as his press release states—perhaps by the time the Bill goes to another place, propose similar new clauses. As he is keen on Government legislation, perhaps next year he could even promote an entirely new Bill to implement similar measures. Nevertheless, I am keen to hear why he has decided that it is no longer appropriate to include such a provision in his Bill.

Mr. Simon Burns (West Chelmsford): I congratulate my right hon. Friend the Member for Penrith and The Border (Mr. Maclean) on his new clauses and the way in which he spoke to them. I have much sympathy with many of his comments. He mentioned some earlier comments of mine and I make no bones about the fact that when I announced that I would introduce the Bill, in late December, I had hoped to be able to include provisions to give powers to the courts, in certain circumstances and under certain controls, to place international and domestic banning orders on people unconvicted in a British court but who the police and courts have reasonable grounds to believe would commit an offence if they travelled to a football match.

10 am

Clearly, such a power could not be used willy-nilly to settle scores, to undertake round-ups or to bring hundreds of people before the courts. It would have to be used with great responsibility, because—as my right hon. Friend the Member for Penrith and The Border said—it raises civil liberties issues. However, the police and NCIS know of a number of people who are determined to cause misery and suffering to pursue their own agendas and to benefit from crime under cover of the crowds associated with football matches. In many ways, the organisers of such activities have escaped action in the courts and it is the thugs on the ground who have been charged with offences—the same problem arises with drug-related offences.

In those circumstances, I thought it might be right to include a provision in the Bill to give the police an opportunity to make a case to the courts for them to determine whether there were reasonable grounds, in exceptional circumstances, to restrict the attendance of unconvicted individuals at football matches. The provision would have included opportunities for the individuals to attend the court and make the case for their innocence. If the courts were not convinced and believed that the authorities had presented a compelling case, the individuals would have a right of appeal. In that way, safeguards would have been in place.

As my right hon. Friend the Member for Penrith and The Border said, precedents exist in English law for such provisions, and he cited the Crime and Disorder Act 1998. I mentioned on Second Reading the powers relating to individuals on bail and, in exceptional circumstances, to those involved in difficult child custody cases. The courts already have, and use, similar powers.

In the past two years, the Conservative party has become a listening party, and I believe that that is commendable. It is time politicians were prepared to listen, because we do not always have all the answers to all the issues. I listened carefully on Second Reading to several speeches from hon. Members on both sides of the House. They were supportive of the Bill, but they expressed strong concerns about the powers we have been discussing. I have also met several outside organisations and listened to their concerns about those powers.

Mr. Maclean: Am I right in thinking that the Football Association has said that the powers would be helpful?

Mr. Burns: My right hon. Friend is right, and I did not wish to give the impression that every organisation associated with or interested in football is against the powers. Indeed, I would like to see those powers on the statute book in some shape or form so that the police and the courts have another weapon in their armoury to combat the problem of football hooliganism. However, I am also a realist, and as I thought more about this highly contentious issue, I came to the conclusion that it would be more sensible not to pursue it via a private Member's Bill.

In effect, the new clauses would give the courts the power to impose a penalty on unconvicted individuals if their background leads the courts to believe that they might commit acts of violence or other forms of hooliganism. Denying the right of freedom of movement to an individual is so serious that I believe that it should be done by Government legislation rather than through a private Member's Bill. It gives me no pleasure to say that, because I would like the authorities to have those powers alongside the other powers in the Bill.

The Minister made it clear in Committee that she and her hon. Friends support the principle behind the powers in the new clauses and I hope that the Government will seek to include them in criminal justice legislation as soon

as possible. As my right hon. Friend the Member for Penrith and The Border said, last year the Opposition sought to introduce a similar proposal on Report to the Crime and Disorder Act 1998, although we did not push the matter to a Division.

I am afraid that I cannot support the new clauses today for the reasons that I have given, but I hope that the Government will introduce their own similar legislation when parliamentary time permits. I also hope that my right hon. Friend the Member for Penrith and The Border, in the light of my comments, will feel able to withdraw his new clause.

Mr. Tony Clarke (Northampton, South): I shall be brief. I welcome the acceptance by the hon. Member for West Chelmsford (Mr. Burns) that the matter is complicated and that the proof of the Bill would be in its implementation, not in what is said about it here. I agree that the courts may find it difficult to decide whether an offence had been committed and, if so, whether it was football related. Such matters, and others, were discussed in Committee.

However, I wish to challenge the assumption, made by the right hon. Member for Penrith and The Border (Mr. Maclean), that there is an upsurge in hooliganism in the domestic game. He used the phrase "tip of the iceberg", and talked about the serious offences of affray, violence and missile throwing. The increase in arrests for those offences has nothing to do with a resurgence of football violence and hooliganism, but stems from our greater ability to deal with such problems.

For example, the introduction of closed circuit television has been probably the most important step forward in combating hooliganism. The offences of affray, violence and missile throwing are readily detected on CCTV, which means that courts and authorities are able to take action.

Mr. Maclean: In the pursuit of brevity, it is possible that I did not make myself clear. I accept that the number of arrests has fallen over the past five years and that there is not a great upsurge in violence. However, I was quoting a Labour Member who said on Second Reading that the people who are arrested are always the tip of the iceberg and that many others commit violence but are not arrested. That was the only point that I wanted to make. Bryan Drew of NCIS has said also that although the number of those arrested is declining, the proportion of more violent offences is rising.

Mr. Clarke: I accept that explanation, but I hope that the right hon. Gentleman will accept that the Bill is not about violence in the domestic game. It is a tidying-up measure, dealing with issues such as racism and the behaviour of English fans abroad. Legislation to tackle such problems is needed.

I accept the view of the hon. Member for West Chelmsford that a private Member's Bill may not be the way forward. However, I hope that we can continue this debate in the spirit of trying to iron out the difficulties, so that when the Government propose measures, perhaps in a Criminal Justice Bill, there will be total support in the House for dealing with the few remaining hooligans who are responsible for the lingering disrespect for Britain in Europe. Those hooligans arouse nothing but disgust among true football fans.

10.13 am

Mr. Eric Forth (Bromley and Chislehurst): It is perhaps surprising that this debate has attracted so little attention among hon. Members. More than many others, it goes to the heart of the difficult balance that Parliament has to strike, in what we regard as a free society, between the powers given to the authorities and the historic freedoms for individuals that we guard so jealously.

I regret that I part company with my right hon. Friend the Member for Penrith and The Border (Mr. Maclean) over the new clause. I do that rarely, but am obliged to do so on this occasion. New clause 1 would alter the balance that I have described in a completely unacceptable way. I cannot understand why so few hon. Members are in the Chamber this morning, given that it will be left to this thinly attended House to determine that balance, as it would be affected by the new clause and the associated amendments.

One of the most fundamental rights of our citizenry over many centuries is that a person who has not been convicted of an offence is regarded as innocent until proven guilty by due process of law. That right is the subject of the new clause. It was implied in the comments made so far that the law and society are in a weak position with regard to wicked people seeking to act in a way that we find distressing or unacceptable.

However, we already have legislation on the statute book such as the Sporting Events (Control of Alcohol Etc.) Act 1985, the Public Order Act 1986, the Football Spectators (No. 2) Act 1989, the Football (Offences) Act 1991 and the Criminal Justice and Public Order Act 1994, as well as the Crime and Disorder Act 1998, to which my hon. Friend the Member for West Chelmsford (Mr. Burns) and my right hon. Friend the Member for Penrith and The Border have referred. Given that list, and the other provisions in this Bill, one would have thought that the cumulative effect would be that the authorities had sufficient powers to deal with people whose behaviour is deemed to be unacceptable. Yet my right hon. Friend the Member for Penrith and The Border is not content. He wants to alter, in a very significant way, the balance between the power given to the authorities and the rights of individuals. The new clause and the associated amendments go much further than I should have thought conscionable for anyone.

With his typical openness and frankness, my hon. Friend the Member for West Chelmsford has told us that, even though some similar provision remained part of his thinking, he had accepted on Second Reading and in subsequent conversations and consultations that the proposal did not have the necessary support. I agree. I rather regret that my hon. Friend has urged the Government to introduce similar measures and I hope that the Government, too, will perform a listening exercise among their Back Benchers.

10.15 am

My hon. Friend stated in a press release that he was considering the approach embodied in the new clause and that he intended to raise the matter in Committee. On Second Reading, however, Government Back-Bench Members broadly in favour of the Bill and with a long-standing interest in such matters expressed their reservations and indicated that they would not be able to support this measure. Given that background, I was

[Mr. Eric Forth]

surprised when my right hon. Friend the Member for Penrith and The Border brought the new clause back for consideration today.

Mr. Maclean: My hon. Friend the Member for West Chelmsford (Mr. Burns) was in listening mode when he took account of those Labour Members who said that he should not include measures such as those embodied in the new clause. Similarly, on Second Reading I was persuaded by him that there was some merit in the proposal, which is why I decided to table the new clause for consideration today.

Mr. Forth: I accept, of course, my right hon. Friend's explanation, which renders irrelevant my earlier suspicion that, having served with such distinction in the Home Office for so long, he had approached the matter with what I can only describe as a Home Office mentality. In other words, I was concerned that his instinct was that the benefit of the doubt should be given to the authorities rather than to the individual, rather than the other way around. That would not normally be typical of my right hon. Friend, but I assumed that his long and distinguished Home Office experience must have contributed to his tabling of the new clause, although that is a matter for him and not for me.

However, the new clause is before us. I contend that it would affect one of our most fundamental and cherished rights for individuals, which we have guarded through the centuries. It is an irony that Britain, through organisations such as the United Nations and the Council of Europe, has hectored, lectured, guided and inspired other countries to adopt our approach to individual liberties and civil rights, which we have said have great importance for us. Those of us who travel to other legislatures, in the Commonwealth and elsewhere, know that legislators and members of the judiciary in those countries consider individual rights and civil liberties to be of key importance at the end of the 20th century. We can take much of the credit for that, although our American friends might say they had something to do with it, and I would not argue with that. It must surely be inappropriate to challenge our liberties as the new clause does.

In his excellent exposition, my hon. Friend the Member for West Chelmsford said that when he first decided, at the Committee stage, to add the new clause to the Bill, he wished to reassure us that the power would be used not willy-nilly, but responsibly. Such siren words are often used. We are told, "Don't worry, folks—these huge, draconian powers will be used responsibly. Trust the authorities and all will be well."

We have heard that sort of thing time and again down the centuries and across the globe from people who wish to encroach on individual liberties, and my hon. Friend is at it again. Do not worry, he tells us: were there any such prospect of that—I was glad to hear that he accepts that there might be, even if he is urging the Government to consider the new clause—the authorities would use the power responsibly, and we could all sleep in our beds at night without being bothered.

I do not find that reassuring. That is not the likely outcome of my hon. Friend's exercise. Surely the onus must be on those who seek to alter the balance to reassure individual members of society that they will be protected. That is the whole point of our judiciary procedures, and I thought that it was also the point of the European convention on human rights. I do not support that convention, and I mention it only because I have to accept that it exists and that we have gone a long way towards incorporating it in our law. I regret that.

Given, however, that the nation and the House of Commons are committed to the convention, I doubt whether the Bill would survive scrutiny by those who believe in the convention. My right hon. Friend the Member for Penrith and The Border skipped over that point, and I can understand why. I should not use the convention as a principled argument against the Bill because I did not advocate its incorporation into our law, but incorporation has happened and the convention is therefore relevant.

Mr. Maclean: I was not going to mention the convention, although I may return to it later. My right hon. Friend has cast doubt on some of the intelligence gathered by NCIS. May I persuade him in its favour by using the powerful words of Pierre Picone, the divisional commissioner in the Parisian football intelligence centre? Commenting on the world cup in 1998, he described British police intelligence as accurate, thorough and diligent. Georges Querry, the French security co-ordinator, said that the intelligence had been exceptional. I am sure that my right hon. Friend will find their words powerful and persuasive.

Mr. Forth: My right hon. Friend should know me better than to quote foreigners at me. I rarely find them persuasive. I shall certainly take no lessons on civil liberties and individual rights from anyone from France. Anyone who has seen the CRS in operation will know that French respect for individual liberties is, to say the least, scant. I am not impressed by my right hon. Friend when he tells me that some Frenchman in authority is trying to reassure me, him or anyone that things will be all right. If anything, my right hon. Friend reinforces my doubts. Yet again, we are hearing someone in uniform telling us not to worry because these enormous powers will be used with great discretion. It matters not whether that is said in French, English or any other language. I simply cannot accept it.

I see the drift of where Bills such as this are taking us. I feel no happier about the new clause than, to be frank, I did about some of the things that my own Government did over the years. It is quite wrong for legislators to argue that it is increasingly justifiable to use the powers of the Executive to reassure the mass of people that individuals will be restricted. That easy and seductive argument has been used to justify many things, but our attitude historically has been that the individual should be given the benefit of the doubt until due process has demonstrated that he should not.

That principle seems to be slipping away. Increasingly, we are told that the benefit of the doubt should be given to the authorities and to society rather than to individuals, and the reassurances that we have heard this morning are used to justify that drift. My hon. Friend the Member for West Chelmsford originally argued—and has only half

back-tracked from that argument today—that we should not worry because the Bill would be dealt with by the courts. We are supposed to be hugely reassured by that, but recent events in the judiciary lead me to doubt it.

My hon. Friend also said that there would be a right of appeal, but I do not know whether he was right. I see no reference to a right of appeal in the new clause. Does he assume that there will be such a right, or is it to be provided in some other way? Even if it exists, a right of appeal will merely worsen the peculiar position in which someone who has not been convicted of any offence can be dragged before the courts and put through a distressing process. That person is supposed to be reassured because he or she will have a right of appeal, but I do not find that reassuring. I shall not go into all the ramifications of the availability of legal aid or proper defence representation.

Mr. Maclean: I believe that my right hon. Friend supported the legislation on protection from harassment which I introduced. That twin-track legislation created a new criminal offence and provided new civil powers, under which someone alleged to be harassing anyone in any way could be dragged before the courts so that an injunction or banning order could be made. My right hon. Friend was an avid supporter of that legislation, and I was very grateful to him.

Mr. Forth: My right hon. Friend is untypically wrong. He will recall that, as a member of the Government in which he and I served, I was bound by collective responsibility. I was faced with the classic dilemma of those who serve in the foothills of Government, as I did for many years. In considering a Bill such as that introduced by my right hon. Friend, I had to decide whether to be bound by collective responsibility and to support it or to resign from the Government. No doubt I struggled with my conscience, but it would appear that I decided, on reflection, to remain in the Government, to lend reluctant support to my right hon. Friend's Bill and to continue to play my modest role. That is my recollection of what happened. My right hon. Friend's characterisation of my avid support of his measure is not how I remember it.

Mr. Maclean: Having listened to my right hon. Friend for all these years, I cannot believe that he would have put the prospect of advancement before the freedom of the individual.

Mr. Forth: As it happens, I did not get much advancement. I would characterise my prospects as those of survival rather than advancement. Perhaps my right hon. Friend and I can meet later to reminisce over our period in the foothills of Government and the constraints that came with it.

I am not persuaded by the argument that individuals are protected because the matter will be dealt with by the courts, although that does provide the reassurance of due process and judicial protection. Nor was I reassured when my hon. Friend the Member for West Chelmsford said that there would be a right of appeal. Individuals are to be pulled in by the authorities and put through a harrowing judicial process—I shall challenge the process later—with a rather undefined right of appeal, to which the Bill does not refer.

10.30 am

Fortuitously, that brings us to one of the main thrusts of my right hon. Friend's argument. He went on and on about something called NCIS, in which he seems to have enormous faith. I do not know much about that body. The more I hear of it, the more it sounds like a shadowy, sinister body of people. I do not know whether they are in uniform, what constraints are on them, or within which statutory framework they operate; but the more I hear of them the more worried I become.

I hear more and more about covert surveillance and people being picked up in car parks and whistled off here and there. My right hon. Friend seems to think that that is all good stuff. His period in the Home Office seems to have assured him that if such a body is prying into what is going on in citizens' lives and picking those individuals up and whisking them off into custody, we should all be reassured. I am not sure that I am. I would be even less reassured if I thought that if the new clause were accepted, that sinister group, which no doubt has the enormous resources that such groups always have these days, could pick up people who have not been convicted of any offence but are simply suspected or accused of doing something or being minded to do it. That is what my right hon. Friend seems to be saying.

That brings us to another crucial part of what is being suggested. From what my right hon. Friend has said, it appears that people will not necessarily have had to do something. This sinister body, NCIS, has simply to believe or have reason to believe that people are minded to, or are going to, commit an offence. That would be sufficient to whistle them off, deprive them of their liberty and put them through some harrowing court procedure.

Mr. Burns: I am a little concerned about my right hon. Friend's use of the word "sinister". The work that NCIS does to advance the cause of law and order is tremendous. Will he be reassured by the fact that it was the Government in which he, my right hon. Friend the Member for Penrith and The Border (Mr. Maclean) and I all served that set the body up, presumably through primary legislation which he supported at the time?

Mr. Forth: The more I hear, the more I worry about what went on in the Home Office over the past 18 years or so. It is funny that I should say this, but if I had been a Back Bencher between 1988 and 1997, I might well not have supported a lot of this nonsense that I now learn that Government were enacting. I was constrained by collective responsibility and therefore obliged to support the legislation.

I am not at all certain whether I would have supported the creation of that body. In a gesture of friendship to my hon. Friend the Member for West Chelmsford, I will not use the epithet "sinister"—I will think of a more appropriate one in the next few minutes. However, it is a fact that I am unaware of what it does, as are most people, and yet there it is, working away quietly and secretly, allegedly on our behalf. Nevertheless, it appears to have wide powers.

My point, which is surely key to the new clause, is that my right hon. Friend seems to suggest that, having carried out its surveillance, gone to these car parks and done what it does there, all that NCIS needs to do is to satisfy itself that an individual member of society may be minded to

[Mr. Forth]

commit some act related to football. That will be sufficient for that person to be deprived of his or her liberty and whisked off to a judicial process in a court. I will refer to the other authorities mentioned in the new clause in a moment, as I accept that they have a role to play as well—this is a multi-stage process.

How quickly or even whether the individual would have access to a court is another matter, as is the question of whether they would be held in custody for an undefined period before they had access to the judicial process. I wonder whether my right hon. Friend has given that matter sufficient thought and whether he can provide any assurances that the individual, having been deprived of his or her liberties on more or less flimsy grounds, would at least have the reassurance of having the case considered promptly rather than having to wait, or what is worse, being incarcerated for any period of time. My right hon. Friend did not mention that and I do not know whether it is in his power, or even that of the Minister, to reassure me. At the least, there is an area of doubt about which we should be extremely concerned.

My right hon. Friend said that we should not be too worried and he listed some extremely important people who would be involved and whom he obviously thought we could trust implicitly. He mentioned chief constables and the Commissioner of Police of the Metropolis as coming within the definition of relevant authorities in the new clause. It states:

"any chief officer of police".

However, he spoiled the whole thing because he swept into his definition someone called the director-general of NCIS. The difficulty is that it is one thing for us to give a proper role—a discretionary role or role of judgment—to chief constables and the Commissioner of the Metropolitan police, as we traditionally do and have done for many years in statute, but it is quite another to go a stage further and to give such a role to this shadowy figure, the director-general of NCIS, of whom I had not heard until now, although obviously I should have done.

I do not know where that person comes from, what his or her statutory authority is, or anything of the kind; nor do I know what constraints are on the director-general of the type that we are increasingly placing on chief constables—the new Greater London Assembly will have an important role in the part played by the police in Greater London, as the Minister well knows. Perhaps my right hon. Friend can reassure me.

Mr. Maclean: I am sure that my right hon. Friend, with his new computer facility, will soon be surfing on hyperspace. Then, he will find all the NCIS press releases and information about Mr. Bryan Drew, the director-general of NCIS. Nevertheless, the important point is that NCIS now has the same statutory basis as an ordinary police authority under the Police Act 1997—another wonderfully libertarian piece of legislation that I had the pleasure to put through the House. That Act created a service authority too. Therefore, the director-general is in the same position as a chief constable, with an elected service authority to give the democratic accountability element.

Mr. Forth: I am grateful to my right hon. Friend, who has set my mind at ease, but only within the limited terms in which I asked the question. Perhaps he has slightly restored my confidence in the Home Office during the term of office of the Government in whom I served and in some of the legislation in which he played a distinguished part. He has given me some confidence.

We have established, and it has usefully been placed on the record, which demonstrates the value of this little debate, that the director-general of NCIS—we now even know his name—is, slightly reassuringly, subject to the same accountabilities and constraints as are placed on the other authorities. However, the director-general is not mentioned in my right hon. Friend's new clause. Therefore, if we mistakenly agree to it, which I hope we will not, I am not sure that merely because my right hon. Friend has said so the director-general would be included in subsection (2), which states:

"In this section, 'relevant authority' means any chief officer of police".

I suspect not. That may be one of the defects to which my right hon. Friend, with his typical candour, referred during his opening remarks on his new clause.

Were the House to accept new clause 1, that point may have to be reconsidered in another place. I do not want to quibble on technicalities—we try to avoid that and debate, as I am doing, the substance of issues—but we have already found a flaw. We have flushed out what may be a serious lacuna in the drafting which would have to be corrected were we, mistakenly, to proceed with it.

The court access that may or may not be available in this encroachment on individual liberties must be considered. What if the relevant authority was not immediately available to make a judgment? The covert operations, following surveillance operations by NCIS, have swept people from the car park and whisked them off in a black van to some dank cell—but it is all right because a relevant authority will quickly consider the matter and decide whether to pass it to the courts. What if the relevant authority is not available?

Mr. Maclean *rose—*

Mr. Forth: I want my right hon. Friend to listen. I think that he is going to reassure me again, but I want to put this on record. What if the chief constable or director-general of NCIS were at an important conference on civil liberties? What if they were abroad boasting about how Britain had a sacred regard for civil liberties? If they were, I hope that they would admit to what NCIS was getting up to. I suspect that my right hon. Friend is going to bail me out again.

Mr. Maclean: It will be a source of deep regret to my right hon. Friend, but we no longer have any dank cells. They are too warm and cosy for his liking. The term "chief officers" should encompass deputy and assistant chief constables, all of whom are of Association of Chief Police Officers rank.

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Sir Alan Haselhurst): Order. It is time for me to assist the House. The debate is going far too wide in dealing with the issues raised in new clause 1 on international banning orders. New clause 1 is about whether such orders should be extended to unconvicted persons.

Mr. Forth: I was merely querying a term in the new clause, but I shall not trespass further on your good will, Mr. Deputy Speaker.

Apparently not unreasonably, subsection (3) states:

"the court may, if it thinks fit, impose such conditions in the order as may be imposed where an order is made in respect of a person who has been convicted of a relevant offence".

This is the crux of the matter. I do not blame my right hon. Friend for this because it was how he had cleverly to construct new clause 1, but it is not obvious from the wording that unconvicted persons can have their freedoms and liberties restricted. We must consider carefully not only new clause 1, but new clause 2 and the consequential amendments Nos. 33 to 42 to get a full sense of what subsection (3) really means: someone who has not been convicted of any offence in our judicial process can nevertheless be made subject to an order restricting his liberties. Never mind all the objections that I have briefly outlined, this is where I part company from my right hon. Friend. I stand firmly by the view that unless someone has been properly convicted through our judicial process, we should not be able to take such measures.

10.45 am

Later, we will discuss other important provisions concerning the removal of passports, which I find equally threatening, but here we are discussing a simple principle. I cannot agree with my right hon. Friend's approach. I am unhappy with his mechanisms for dealing with the matter. I am unhappy about the role of NCIS and of the chief officers, whom we now learn can be almost anyone in the bizarre world of the Home Office. I am unhappy about the lack of reassurance in respect of court proceedings and the alleged right of appeal, which appears nowhere in the new clause.

I am even more unhappy about my core objection. I was half relieved when my hon. Friend the Member for West Chelmsford said that he does not support new clause 1, but I was appalled when he went on to urge the Government to introduce a Bill of their own to do it, but we will leave the fight for another day. I hope that the Minister will be more reassuring and remember what her Back Benchers said on Second Reading. I hope that she will not be persuaded by my hon. Friend; we will find out soon. I vigorously oppose new clause 1, as I hope the Minister will.

I hope that my right hon. Friend the Member for Penrith and The Border will reconsider, cast to one side his distinguished service in the Home Office, and reflect on the matter in a fresh light as an even more distinguished Opposition Back Bencher. I hope that he is aware of the importance of individual liberties as against those authorities in whose company he moves so effortlessly. I hope that he will think again and that we do not have to divide the House on the matter.

Mrs. Eleanor Laing (Epping Forest): My hon. Friend the Member for Ryedale (Mr. Greenway), who has previously dealt with this matter for the Opposition, unfortunately cannot be here, so I stand in his place.

This debate is important because we are not merely debating the addition of a short new clause to a short Bill: we are considering a vital principle of the operation of the civil law. My right hon. and hon. Friends and the hon. Member for Northampton, South (Mr. Clarke) have highlighted the difficulty of achieving the right balance between the freedom of the individual and the necessity of protecting innocent bystanders. That is what the criminal law is all about.

I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for West Chelmsford (Mr. Burns) on his carefully balanced presentation. I am delighted that he has been listening. I agree that the Bill is better as it is, without new clause 1.

We had an excellent consideration of the principles in the debate between my right hon. Friends the Members for Penrith and The Border (Mr. Maclean) and for Bromley and Chislehurst (Mr. Forth)—a debate that was unusual as my right hon. Friends normally agree with each other. In taking the argument carefully to pieces and reconstructing it, they have quite properly—as is the duty of the House—given us the chance to consider the principle before us, as did the hon. Member for Northampton, South, who also spoke well.

The Opposition do not disagree in principle about what we are all trying to achieve in the Bill. We are all trying to achieve a better regulation of football supporters' behaviour and to give the right amount of power to the police and other authorities so that they can deal with hooliganism in football grounds and in connection with football games. We all want to achieve the same thing for the great sport of football at which our countries—I stress the plural—are so good on the world and the European stage. It is such a shame that, often, the achievements on the pitch are diminished and besmirched by what happens off the pitch. The Opposition therefore have no disagreement with the measure in principle.

There has been some confusion about the similarity between the provisions of this Bill and those in the Crime and Disorder Act 1998 relating to ASBOs—for the uninitiated, ASBOs are antisocial behaviour orders and are a vital part of the 1998 Act. ASBOs restrict freedom without a criminal conviction, but they cannot be imposed without resort to the civil court. An ASBO can be imposed only after a legal hearing, whereas the provisions of the new clause would result in a much more summary administration of justice. It is not correct to argue that the effect of the new clause would be similar to the imposition of ASBOs. I shall be interested to know whether the Minister agrees with that point. ASBOs do not go quite so far in administering summary justice as the new clause would.

I agree with my hon. Friend the Member for West Chelmsford that the Opposition would welcome further discussion of that matter, if the Government want to pursue it in a future Bill, as they have indicated that they might. I conclude by pointing out again that what we are trying to achieve is the important balance between the liberty of the individual and the protection of the public. That is a fine balance, but I strongly believe that it is the duty of the House always to protect first the freedom of the individual. The Opposition support the Bill as it stands.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the Home Department (Kate Hoey): This has been a most interesting and enjoyable hour and a half. I thank the right hon. Member for Penrith and The Border (Mr. Maclean) for tabling the new clause. We spent much time on Second Reading discussing the issues that it raises, even though they were not specifically included in the Bill. Those issues were also discussed in Committee, although not in relation to a particular clause. We have now considered a specific clause and the right hon. Gentleman is to be congratulated on having given us that opportunity to discuss the important question of how we deal with

[Kate Hoey]

football hooliganism committed by people against whom it is not possible to use the normal court proceedings. On Second Reading and in Committee, we were aware that there were several serious concerns about such measures; they were also expressed in response to the football consultation document, "Review of Football Related Legislation", to which the right hon. Gentleman has referred.

The document considered the introduction of tougher ways to deal with unconvicted hooligans. The response to the public consultation exercise was mixed and demonstrated serious concern about introducing bans without prior conviction. We have discussed the matter with the hon. Member for West Chelmsford (Mr. Burns) and have taken into account the views of hon. Members on both sides of the House and of respondents to the public consultation exercise. As the hon. Member for Epping Forest (Mrs. Laing) pointed out, in all legislation we must strike a balance between the civil liberties of the individual and those of the general public.

We must also take into account the practical and operational concerns about how the measures proposed in the new clause would work. The obtaining of such an order would rely exclusively on the quality of intelligence and information put before the court by the police and the prosecutor. In presenting that information, as the right hon. Member for Penrith and The Border pointed out, the police may be required to compromise their intelligence-gathering mechanisms, including information on informants. We may not like informants, but in reality, they can sometimes play an important role in combating crime—especially organised crime.

I am surprised that the right hon. Member for Bromley and Chislehurst (Mr. Forth) seems to know so little about the National Criminal Intelligence Service. It is an important organisation, which carries out a wide range of work combating criminal activity—especially organised crime. Its headquarters are in my constituency—a few minutes' walk from the House—and I am sure that, if John Abbott, the director-general, is fortunate enough to read the account of this debate, he will want to invite the right hon. Gentleman to visit NCIS. As the right hon. Member for Penrith and The Border said, anyone who sees what NCIS is doing will not fail to be impressed. The service operates in a statutory framework; it is accountable and is required to report to a service authority. It may further reassure the right hon. Member for Bromley and Chislehurst to know that the chairman of that service authority is a former Member of the House, Sir John Wheeler. I hope I have reassured the right hon. Gentleman that NCIS is not a sinister organisation, but a most important one.

Clearly, it would be an operational decision for chief officers whether to acquire the evidence required to stop an unconvicted hooligan travelling abroad. We are also concerned that some overseas jurisdictions may look to this proposed new power as a means by which they can deport suspected offenders from their country without prosecution, on the basis that when such people returned to this country they would be liable to action in the courts here. The right hon. Gentleman will remember how annoying it was to see people behaving appallingly in European countries and being instantly sent back here. We wanted those countries to take people to court and we are co-operating with other European countries so that that can be done. We want to continue to encourage the jurisdictions in which the offence has been committed to use the due process of law in that country to seek convictions. It was most disturbing to see footage of people behaving violently, and to know that the next day they would be sent back to this country—probably free—and that we could do nothing about it.

We should also consider the position of information gathered in a foreign jurisdiction and the ability to make use of it in a court in this country. At present, the taking of video material is subject to privacy laws in some countries and those laws place restrictions on the use of such material. There are difficult, practical problems as to how we obtain the evidence in order to convict hooligans through the judicial system.

The Bill, as it is constituted at present, would introduce a range of measures to strengthen and improve the existing banning process and its effective enforcement. If those measures are introduced, they will have a significant effect. They will make a difference, by increasing the number of banning orders while sending out a strong preventive message. We clearly have to monitor the effectiveness of the Bill—if it is passed—in terms of offences committed and the number of orders. We need to be in possession of that information before we can further consider the significant new powers proposed in the new clause.

The right hon. Member for Bromley and Chislehurst may well be right to say that we shall have to revisit this debate in future, and it is possible that we will need those extra powers. However, given that the Bill's existing provisions command the support of so many people, we must wait and see how they work in practice.

11 am

Mr. Forth: Does the Minister share my reservations about the speed of access to the court procedure that might be available, were the approach she has set out to be taken? She acknowledges that that question might have to be re-examined, so I am putting down a marker as much as anything else. However efficient NCIS may or may not be, and however accessible the chief constable and all the other people mentioned by my right hon. Friend the Member for Penrith and The Border (Mr. Maclean) may or may not be, unless access to the court process is quickly available, we run the risk of seriously encroaching on people's liberties without their ever having been convicted of anything.

Kate Hoey: The right hon. Gentleman is right. If the Bill had been proposed as a Government measure, such assurances, checks and balances would have to be carefully considered and speed of access ensured. However, the Bill is not a Government Bill, although we are supporting it wholeheartedly, and the hon. Member for West Chelmsford has made his views known on the subject.

We need time to monitor how the additional powers to deal with convicted hooligans that the Bill will give when enacted work in practice. There is cross-party concern that we should do all that we can to prevent known hooligans from going about their activities freely. There is support both within the House and outside for ensuring that such people cannot travel abroad, which is why we inserted

provisions dealing with the removal of passports. We do not want our country's name to be besmirched by the disgraceful incidents that have been witnessed over the past few years.

I acknowledge the sentiment behind the amendments and have some sympathy with them. We shall discuss with the Opposition and all interested parties what further action can be taken in the light of monitoring the effectiveness of the Bill. However, the amendments do not command the universal support that the Bill's other provisions command, and to insert contentious provisions into a private Member's Bill presents greater difficulties. Although that is not in itself a reason not to proceed—sometimes it is necessary to do things that substantial numbers of people dislike—the success of football legislation relies on a vast range of factors, including policing, intelligence, effective stewarding, closed circuit television, safer and more comfortable grounds and effective ticketing policies. Most importantly, it also relies on the support of those who are affected—the football supporters.

The provisions of the Bill as it stands have achieved widespread support. Including the amendments at this time, without the detailed consideration that I have mentioned, would be likely, at best, to reduce confidence in the legislation and, at worst, to alienate the very people whose support we need in order to combat hooliganism. For those reasons, and in the light of the assurance that we shall keep the legislation under review, I hope that the right hon. Member for Penrith and The Border will withdraw his new clause.

Mr. Maclean: This has been an important debate and it has been quite contentious at times. My right hon. Friend the Member for Bromley and Chislehurst (Mr. Forth) is right: it is a pity that on such an occasion, when we are making important amendments to the criminal law, the House is not packed with some of our great parliamentarians from both sides indulging in a debate on the freedom of the individual and civil liberties.

I have listened carefully to the speeches made. There are a few key points on which I wish to reassure my right hon. Friend and a few comments I wish to make on the Minister's speech before I decide whether to withdraw the new clause. For the sake of brevity, and so that I did not stray too far out of order, I did not explain fully what NCIS was and what it did. I apologise for my arrogance: having worked with NCIS when I was a Minister at the Home Office, I assumed that everybody knew what the acronym stood for. It stands for National Criminal Intelligence Service—

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. The right hon. Gentleman does not need to explain that to the House—it has all been done before.

Mr. Maclean: I shall give my right hon. Friend the Member for Bromley and Chislehurst a briefing on NCIS later, or he can tune in to its website and read the information there. As for an invitation to visit, if NCIS is as sinister as he believes it to be, I do not think that he will need to ask for an invitation, for the second he steps outside the door of the House, he will be swept off the street, taken to a dark cell and briefed by John Abbott himself. But NCIS is not a sinister organisation.

I did not specifically mention NCIS in the new clause, because I did not think that I had to. I took the view that the phrase "chief officer of police" includes the Commissioner of the Metropolitan police and the head of NCIS, who has to be of chief officer rank before taking that post.

Mr. Forth: Can my right hon. Friend and the Minister guarantee that, were I to go anywhere near NCIS, I would have immunity?

Mr. Maclean: My right hon. Friend has not committed any offence under the terms of this legislation and he is not suspected of being a violent hooligan or of causing disorder, nor do I believe him to be suspected of committing any of the other crimes with which NCIS concerns itself—drug dealing, terrorism and paedophilia. Therefore, I believe that he is safe.

Kate Hoey: It might be worth clarifying the question of the term "chief officer of police". That category includes chief constables, the Commissioner of Police of the Metropolis and the City Commissioner, but it does not include the director-general of NCIS, even though he is of similar status. In practice, NCIS passes intelligence to chief officers of police. It does not initiate prosecutions itself, so the right hon. Member for Bromley and Chislehurst (Mr. Forth) is quite safe.

Mr. Maclean: That was an extremely helpful clarification of that part of my clause. Even though the term "chief officer of police" in my new clause does not include the director-general of NCIS, there would be no glaring lacuna in the law, because NCIS would pass on the information and act as an intelligence-gathering body for the whole British police service, and local chief officers would then use the powers designated in my new clause to go to the court. Unless my right hon. Friend has any other specific concerns about NCIS, I do not propose to make further reference to it.

My right hon. Friend was concerned about balance. It is a serious matter to extend the criminal law to curtail the freedom of movement of individuals who have not been convicted of an offence, but similar powers already exist in the Protection from Harassment Act 1997. That Act allows people—men or women—to go to court to obtain an injunction to prevent someone from hanging around outside their flat, even though that person is doing nothing but hanging around, when they feel threatened or harassed by that person in those circumstances. The principle before us is similar.

If we can build into our legislation the principle that someone can be prevented from phoning another person, sending that person flowers, or hanging around outside that person's flat, surely it is no greater step to provide that, when the police apprehend that there may be violence and disorder and the courts conclude that that is so, a person may be prevented from travelling to a venue to commit that violence or disorder.

Mr. Forth: I am beginning to suspect my right hon. Friend of being a closet Marxist. He appears to be talking about irreversibility and inevitability, saying that, because we have done something before, we can do it again now. Has he not considered the possibility that what we did before can be proved to have been wrong, or that we got

[Mr. Forth]

the balance wrong on that occasion? Surely my right hon. Friend does not believe that it is adequate to argue that, because we have done something before, it must be all right to do it now?

Mr. Maclean: I am not making that point. I am not following the Marxist supremacy of law point that I learned and forgot about 30 years ago. My point is simply that there is a precedent: the proposal does not break new ground. In fact, the measure is in the Crime and Disorder Act 1998 which refers to disorderly and disruptive children. I am not saying that we should extend the measure to this legislation because we have done so before.

There is potential for extending the measure to deal with problems of violence and disorder. The figures are decreasing: the arrest rate has fallen to 13.4 per 100,000 spectators in the past year, compared with 15.7 in the previous season. In 1997-98, arrests totalled 3,307, compared with 3,577 in 1996-97. Although the total has decreased—there were 1,000 drink-related arrests, 500 arrests for disorderly behaviour and about 300 for threatening behaviour—the numbers of violent disorder and affray offences, at 65 and 52, is double those of the previous season. Although the number of offences overall continues to decrease—many of the offences are minor, including drink-related offences and breaches of exclusion orders—the nasty offences, such as violent disorder or racial or indecent chanting, have increased. The police have pointed out that the figures show that football hooliganism at home is continuing to decline. Criminal intelligence—

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. The House extends to the proposer of a new clause the privilege to speak a second time in order to allow him to reply to the debate. The right hon. Gentleman should not make his arguments all over again.

Mr. Maclean: My apologies, Mr. Deputy Speaker. I was attempting to respond to the points raised by my right hon. Friend the Member for Bromley and Chislehurst (Mr. Forth)—I had better not try to respond to all of them. I clearly may not be able to persuade him to my point of view. I am not saying that, because few people will be affected, it does not matter if we deprive them of their civil liberties.

Mr. Tony Clarke: I do not wish to get the right hon. Gentleman in trouble with you, Mr. Deputy Speaker, but I refer him to his comments about the increasing number of arrests for racial and verbal abuse. Will the right hon. Gentleman congratulate the vast number of football supporters in this country who are responsible for bringing about those arrests? People are less tolerant of racism and fascism at our football grounds, and supporters are making stewards aware of unacceptable behaviour. That has led to an increase in the number of arrests.

Mr. Maclean: The hon. Gentleman is absolutely correct. Because the number of arrests has decreased and football grounds have become safer, people no longer expect to attend matches and have cans thrown at them. They expect to attend football matches with their families, as rugby spectators have been able to do for 100 years. Football supporters are now less tolerant of that sort of behaviour.

Nevertheless, there was a small increase, from 10 to 33, in the number of people arrested for racial or indecent chanting. The police have said vociferously in their press releases that, while they are concerned about that increase in hard core offences, the number of offences has declined in relation to the number of people attending football matches. That figure has increased dramatically, yet the overall arrest rate has fallen. That means that more decent, honest people and fewer hooligans are attending football matches.

My new clause seeks to deal with the small number of hard core supporters to whom the police continually refer. As with any criminal activity—terrorism and so on—the hard core offenders hide behind those in the front line and foment violence and disorder, but they are not convicted.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. The right hon. Gentleman is now repeating himself. He is using almost exactly the same language as he used in his opening speech, and I am not prepared to accept that.

Mr. Maclean: I am sorry, Mr. Deputy Speaker. I was led slightly astray by the intervention of the hon. Member for Northampton, South (Mr. Clarke).

A further point relates to the European convention on human rights, of which my right hon. Friend the Member for Bromley and Chislehurst suggested the new clause could fall foul. I do not think that it will. As I suspect the Minister is not seriously contemplating enacting the measure, she will not yet have checked with the ECHR provisions. However, if something has judicial approval and is to go before a court, I think we may be satisfied on ECHR grounds.

Kate Hoey: I mentioned this matter on Second Reading. We are satisfied at present that the measures outlined in the review document in respect of unconvicted persons would not, in principle, be in breach of the ECHR or the EC treaty, provided that sufficient safeguards were in place. However, if we were to pursue the measures, we would have to ensure that they complied fully with all our international obligations.

11.15 am

Mr. Maclean: I am grateful to the Minister. That is the best possible answer that my right hon. Friend could receive. I do not need to elaborate on it one iota as it responds fully to my right hon. Friend's concerns—

Mr. Forth: Except that, if this measure were to be compatible with the ECHR, it would confirm my view that the ECHR is pretty useless.

Mr. Maclean: I may agree with that point of view on many occasions—indeed, I may agree with it now. However, my right hon. Friend objected to my new clause on the basis that it could fall foul of the ECHR. The Minister says that it will not, and it is not adequate for my right hon. Friend to respond by saying, "Well, the ECHR is rubbish".

The Minister touched on a crucial point concerning evidence. The police may not wish to go to the court and seek a banning order if they do not have sufficient

evidence, or if their evidence is based on information from informants or on the release of other information. However, that point does not work against my new clause because the police might be in that position at present. Because they can secure a conviction only by revealing a valuable source of information or intelligence, the police may decide in a variety of cases—including football-related cases—to ask the Crown Prosecution Service to drop the case. That happens on rare occasions—we may not know about them—and it will be no different in future. If the only way of persuading the court to grant a banning order—either domestically or internationally—is by revealing certain information to the court, and therefore to the accused, the police may decide that, because such evidence could not be provided in camera or in private, it is not worth the candle and they will not proceed. I do not think it destroys my new clause to acknowledge that the police will not pursue a conviction in some cases. That is a judgment for them.

My right hon. Friend—who is not officially learned yet—referred to the speed of access to the court process. The police will be seeking banning orders. They will not sweep people off the streets, as my right hon. Friend suggested, and keep them in cells for days before taking them to court. Even if there were no other provisions in the criminal law, it would be in the interests of the chief officer of police to sweep a hooligan off the street, to take him to court as soon as possible and secure a banning order. The offender could then be released back into the public domain, but he would not be able to travel to a particular football match.

Mr. Forth: Does the chief officer—whoever that may be—have control over the speed of the court process? I believe there are two separate issues. It is one thing for the chief officer to enforce the provisions of the new clause and quite another to give the individual who is subject to this measure any reassurances about the extent to which the judicial process will be readily available to him.

Mr. Maclean: Of course the chief officer cannot dictate when people will get to court. Nevertheless, those people are not kept in police detention for the whole time.

Mr. Forth: Where are they?

Mr. Maclean: They are at liberty.

Mr. Forth: Are they in the car park?

Mr. Maclean: If people are arrested in the car park and they have weapons of violence, they could be committing an offence, so they could be arrested and charged appropriately. The point about my new clause is that it seeks a banning order to stop people travelling overseas to a football match. It is not necessary for the police to keep them in permanent custody to achieve that, but it is in their interests to get the banning order and release the people into the public domain. They must then report into a police station, hand over their passport or comply with any conditions imposed by the court. My right hon. Friend need not be worried that access to justice would be too slow and that it would therefore deny individuals their liberty.

I have tried, with the new clause, to extend criminal law. I appreciate that I have suggested moving into an area that causes deep concern to some of my hon. Friends. The Minister is also concerned that there are loose ends, and she wants the current legislation to bed down before taking the step of introducing banning orders for people who have not yet been convicted of a criminal offence. Clearly, if I were to pursue the new clause to a vote, I would not have the unanimous approval of the House and, in any case, I would lose my customary partner teller.

Bearing it in mind that my hon. Friend the Member for West Chelmsford (Mr. Burns) has been persuaded by the Government to do a U-turn and that the Minister advises me not to pursue my new clause now—I greatly respect her opinion on a range of issues—I shall not do so, although it has been worth while airing the arguments. I beg to ask leave to withdraw the motion.

Motion and clause, by leave, withdrawn.

Clause 1

International Football Banning Orders

Mr. Forth: I beg to move amendment No. 10, in page 1, line 17, leave out 'the duty of' and insert 'available to'.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: With this, it will be convenient to discuss the following amendments: No. 11, in page 1, line 23, leave out 'shall' and insert 'may'.

No. 1, in page 1, line 26, at end insert—

'(2B) Where a court makes an international football banning order, it shall state in open court that it is satisfied that there are such reasonable grounds as are mentioned in subsection (2) above and give reasons why it is so satisfied.'.

No. 22, in clause 5, page 6, line 31, leave out

'shall be under a duty to'

and insert 'may'.

No. 6, in page 6, line 40, at end insert—

'(5B) Where a court makes an international football banning order, it shall state in open court that it is satisfied that there are such reasonable grounds as are mentioned in subsection (5) above and give reasons why it is so satisfied.'.

No. 23, in clause 6, page 7, line 32, leave out 'the duty of' and insert 'available to'.

No. 7, in page 7, line 42, at end insert—

'(3A) Where a court makes a domestic football banning order, it shall state in open court that it is satisfied that there are such reasonable grounds as are mentioned in subsection (2) and give reasons why it is so satisfied.'.

Mr. Forth: The amendments take us into new but not entirely unrelated territory because the wording that I seek to amend is another attempt to curtail the traditional freedoms of the courts and the judicial process. The Bill says:

"Subject to subsection (3) below, it shall be the duty of the court to make an international football banning order in relation to the accused if it is satisfied that there are reasonable grounds to believe that making the order would help to prevent violence or disorder at or in connection with designated football matches."

In other words, the Bill gives a statutory instruction to a court to do something. That strikes me as a step too far.

I have always understood that traditionally, in this country, we prefer the court to be given the maximum discretion to make its judgment in the light of the full

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circumstances known to it at the time. It is not even for this House to seek to pre-empt what might happen in a court. The whole point of our judicial process and court proceedings is that the court will listen carefully to the arguments of both sides. It must then make several decisions, the first of which is whether the defendant is guilty or innocent. The next is concerned with sentencing. In doing that, the court will have to take into account all the circumstances made known in the proceedings and, most obviously, decide whether there are any mitigating circumstances.

The provision in the Bill therefore strikes me as peculiar, to say the least. I have always been uneasy about the Bill, but this sort of provision has made me even more uneasy. I cannot understand why my hon. Friend the Member for West Chelmsford (Mr. Burns) cannot be content with normal judicial proceedings. Instead, most uncharacteristically, he resorts to wording such as that in clause 1 and seeks to use his Bill as a vehicle to prescribe to the court what it will do. My hon. Friend cannot know what will happen in court.

Mr. Tony Clarke: I do not want to destroy the right hon. Gentleman's argument so early in the debate, but does not he accept that all we are suggesting is that the court should have a duty—rather than a discretion, as at present—to consider imposing an international banning order? One of the problems in the game today is that many of our hooligans turn up at international fixtures abroad, irrespective of the fact that they have committed an offence and been charged and sentenced, but an international banning order was not imposed on them because the court failed to consider the possibility. All we are doing is requiring the court to consider those orders, rather than leaving that to its discretion.

Mr. Forth: I can see the sense in what the hon. Gentleman is saying and I am interested in his argument. It might be worth reviewing the entire statute book to find out whether we can insert into every statute an obligation that the court should consider this, that or the other as an appropriate penalty. I am tempted by that prospect, although it is not a process that we would usually undertake.

I hope that my right hon. Friend the Member for Penrith and The Border (Mr. Maclean) catches your eye in this debate, Mr. Deputy Speaker, because his experience is most apposite. He might be able to set this debate in the context of the efforts that I seem to recall the previous Government made to bring in minimum sentencing provisions. At that time, as a fellow member of the Government, I thought that the process was very dubious. Although I think that in many cases the actions of the courts are pretty weedy and wishy-washy, and I should be very tempted to bring back mandatory capital punishment for almost anything, I was constrained by another view, which prevailed on that occasion. I believe that, whether I like it or not, I have to respect the ability of the courts to use their proper discretion and judgment in the full knowledge of the circumstances at the time.

Like me, Mr. Deputy Speaker, you must often meet constituents who have read a story in a newspaper and ask, "Why on earth did the court let the defendant off with such a ridiculously light sentence?" You may well reply, as I do, "I do not know because I was not in the court at the time. I did not sit through the proceedings. I did not hear the evidence and I was unable to look at the accused and assess his or her demeanour. I was unable to take account of the full range of circumstances and regrettably, therefore, I cannot come to a judgment." I am always tempted to err on the side of harsh penalties, but I always resist that temptation. Clause 1 and amendment No. 10 take us into the same territory. We have to respect the court's judgment, given the knowledge that it has at the time.

My next part of the argument is similar, and relates to our old friends "may" and "shall". Clause 1(2A) says:

> "Where the court has power to make an international football banning order in relation to the accused but does not do so, it shall state in open court that it is not satisfied that there are such reasonable grounds as are mentioned in subsection (2) above and give reasons why it is not satisfied."

Again, a requirement in the Bill seeks to encroach on the discretion of the court. Surely such decisions must be left to the court's discretion, even if it is stated in open court that it is not satisfied. I can imagine circumstances in which the court might judge that it is not entirely appropriate, proper, fair or reasonable to state openly why it has reached one judgment or another.

I should have thought that we should generally err on the side of openness. My hon. Friend the Member for West Chelmsford—typically, because he is an open sort of guy—has sought to include that openness in his Bill. All I am suggesting, however, is that my hon. Friend, in all his reasonableness, might accept that every now and then there might be circumstances in which such openness might not be appropriate. However, the Bill would not allow the courts to have that degree of discretion. That is why I am arguing that "shall" should be "may". I hope that my hon. Friend the Member for West Chelmsford will see the sense in that, will return to his normal, reasonable demeanour in these matters and will allow the courts to have a degree of discretion.

11.30 am

The argument behind amendment No. 1 appears to go in the opposite direction. Interestingly, I might be about to argue against myself. The amendment reads:

> "Where a court makes an international football banning order, it shall state in open court that it is satisfied that there are reasonable grounds as are mentioned in subsection (2) above and give reasons why it is so satisfied."

I am beginning to have second thoughts. I am wondering whether I am breaching the principle that I have outlined. I do not want to spend excessive time on this matter, notwithstanding its importance, because there are many other important matters that we want to discuss. However, should we be introducing distinctions and saying that it would be justified to allow the courts discretion in one case but not in another? Against that background, I am inclined not to press amendment No. 1.

Mr. Maclean: My right hon. Friend will recall that when we were drafting amendment No. 1 we took the view that we should copy the order set out in clause 1(2A). The clause contains "shall" and we used "shall" in the amendment. If my hon. Friend the Member for West Chelmsford (Mr. Burns) were willing to accept an amendment to clause 1(2A), to insert "may"

in place of "shall", it would be appropriate to have "may" in amendment No. 1. We were merely copying what was already in the Bill.

Mr. Forth: I am grateful to my right hon. Friend for reminding me of why I did what I did. I am merely saying that we should be careful in this instance to ensure that we are as consistent as we can be. I am arguing, I hope consistently, that we should wherever possible give the courts—the judicial process—as much discretion and flexibility as possible. After all, the courts are fully aware of the circumstances at the time. The argument will have been advanced in the courts one way or the other.

As I have said, we may not always agree with the courts, but we respect their judgment. I accept that, perhaps with some reluctance. However, I think that we should always respect the discretion of the courts and allow them to do what they think is appropriate. That is why I am puzzled—I hope that my hon. Friend the Member for West Chelmsford will be able to help us and so set my mind at rest—that the wording of the Bill is extremely prescriptive.

I am anticipating what my hon. Friend might say, but we return to an earlier argument. It seems that the argument runs that we are dealing with such outrageous and heinous crimes and activities that we must take every possible action and make available every power to the courts, the authorities, chief officers of police and all those who are involved in the process, to reassure society that these matters will be dealt with properly. I understand that motivation.

Anyone outside this place and any of our colleagues who are sadly not in their places today will read the title of the Bill, the Football (Offences and Disorder) Bill, and think, "That is probably all right. It seems that it is a fairly minor measure." However, we have discovered that it is not a minor measure. In my hon. Friend's enthusiasm to deal with these matters in his apparently innocent and relatively restricted Bill, he has allowed to creep into it the sort of measures to which I have referred.

I wonder whether my hon. Friend has consulted the representatives of the magistrates and those of the judiciary. Perhaps the Minister has taken the trouble to ask those to whom we give the responsibility to exercise their discretion in the judicial process whether they would welcome constraints being placed upon them, either now or in future.

The hon. Member for Northampton, South (Mr. Clarke) made an interesting point to which we might return in future. He made the intriguing suggestion that perhaps whenever in future we are legislating in this way, we should outline in Bills the thoughts that we have collectively in this place on the sort of penalties that might be properly considered by the courts, or even provide them with a menu from which they could make selections. That would be breaking new ground but it might go part way to answering the problem to which I referred when constituents come to us to ask, "Why did not the courts do this, that or whatever?" We would be giving the courts a range of options. However, we are not in that business.

I hope that I shall be given some explanations and reassurances, and some background that explains why my hon. Friend the Member for West Chelmsford came up with the form of words that appears in the Bill, what he thought he would achieve, and whether he shares my worry that we are doing something that we might live to regret, setting a precedent of which my right hon. Friend the Member for Penrith and The Border seems suddenly to be so fond. I hope that we shall not hear, "We have done it before so it is all right." I would rather hear it said, if I may draft a speech for my right hon. Friend, that if we believe that the things done in the past were not correct or have had an adverse effect, we should have the openmindedness and flexibility to say, "That was not the proper way to do it. We have the balance wrong. We are encroaching too much on individual liberties and court discretion"—and on all the other areas of our tradition that I thought were sacrosanct and hallowed. It appears that they are no longer considered in that way.

Some extremely important principles arise from this modest Bill, which contains some quite serious threats to the great traditions of our polity, our judicial process, our history and things in which we have taken such pride. I hope that I am not overstating the position, but I think that the amendment will give an opportunity to my hon. Friend the Member for West Chelmsford, and perhaps the Minister, to tease out some of the arguments and to reassure me. I hope that I shall be reassured, and that is one of the objects of the amendment. If I am not, we may have to take a very serious look at these matters.

Mr. Burns: As my right hon. Friend the Member for Bromley and Chislehurst (Mr. Forth) said in ably speaking to this group of amendments, they fall broadly into two groups. If the House will allow me, I shall keep to those two groups. I shall deal first with amendments Nos. 10, 11 and 23 and then deal with the points that arise from amendments Nos. 1, 6 and 7.

In many ways, I am saddened to have to tell my right hon. Friend the Member for Bromley and Chislehurst that I am not attracted to the amendments. They go to the heart of the Bill and if they were to be accepted they would, to my mind, seriously undermine and undo what I consider is the good work of legislation in giving the authorities—the police and the courts—greater and enhanced powers to deal with those whom I have described before as a small, mindless group of moronic hooligans who cause such a problem.

The effect of my right hon. Friend's first group of amendments within the group as a whole would be, as he rightly said, to remove the duty on courts to make an international and domestic banning order where a football-related offence has been committed, and the court is satisfied that there are reasonable grounds to believe that the order would help to prevent violence and disorder at or in connection with future football matches.

In effect, the amendments would give the courts a discretionary power to make such orders if the relevant conditions were fulfilled. I fear from the evidence that is available so far that the courts have been using their discretion in a wide way, in effect to dilute the laws that are currently in place, because of a reluctance to use a power that will have dramatic effects in preventing hooligans from attending matches and causing the problems from which this country and others have suffered far too much.

For the benefit of my right hon. Friend the Member for Bromley and Chislehurst, the latest figures that I have—I assume that they are still more or less correct because they go to 16 April—show that on 16 April, there were

[Mr. Burns]

113 international banning orders and about 400 domestic banning orders. If the amendments are used to reintroduce the discretionary power, that will seriously undermine the Bill's aim—which is to deal with the problem more effectively.

Mr. Maclean: In my experience, if one tries to tie a court's hands in one area it will free them up in another. Even though clause 1(2) says that

"it shall be the duty of the court to make an international football banning order"

if the court does not like being tied to that, is there not a danger that it will conclude, "We were not satisfied that there were reasonable grounds"—thus giving itself an out in that sense?

Mr. Burns: My right hon. Friend raises a valid point. It is difficult to give him a completely accurate and straightforward answer, because the matter is subjective. He may be correct in some circumstances, but I am not convinced that the courts would behave in that way.

My right hon. Friend the Member for Bromley and Chislehurst should not forget that although the courts have the freedom not to impose a banning order, if they do not use that power, they must give reasons why they have not done so. I believe that it is perfectly reasonable for a court to explain why it has decided not to exercise a power that it has under the law to impose a banning order.

On amendments Nos. 1, 6 and 7, my right hon. Friend the Member for Bromley and Chislehurst said that he might be arguing against himself. He was being slightly harsh on himself in that respect. However, it does seem contradictory—and unnecessary, over-regulatory and a burden on the courts—to impose on courts an obligation to state in open court why they are imposing a banning order. More often than not, when a person is sentenced, having been convicted of an offence, the judge or magistrate is more than ready to explain why they are imposing the sentence and why they consider it justified.

My right hon. Friend hinted that he might not press these amendments, which suggests that I may be pushing at an open door. I believe that, on reflection, he of all people, given his excellent record of seeking to break down the over-burdensome regulation within the state, would feel that it would be unnecessary and unfair to burden courts, judges and magistrates with such an obligation.

Mr. Maclean: My hon. Friend is stretching it a bit too far. His Bill says that the court shall state in open court why it is not imposing an order. He then suggests that it is an over-burdensome new regulatory power to insert a similar power saying that the court shall state in open court why it is imposing an order. I do not think that that is as heavy a regulatory burden as he suggests. Judges are capable of giving their reasons very simply.

Mr. Burns: In a way, my right hon. Friend is making my point, because I mentioned earlier that judges and magistrates, when imposing a punishment or sentencing someone who has been convicted, state their reasons for doing so. I consider that it would be burdensome and nanny-statish to regularise into law something that is already common practice on, to all intents and purposes, a voluntary basis.

I was seeking to explain to my right hon. Friend the Member for Bromley and Chislehurst that, given his reputation and his crusade to prevent individuals from being overburdened at the hands of the state, he may decide to follow his gut instinct not to press that set of amendments. I hope that, when he has had an opportunity to listen to the full debate, he will feel that, whereas it has been extremely useful and important to discuss the issue, it might be sensible not to press the amendments. I leave it in the capable hands of my right hon. Friend to take that decision at the appropriate time.

11.45 am

Mr. Maclean: My right hon. Friend the Member for Bromley and Chislehurst (Mr. Forth) may have been persuaded by the eloquence of my hon. Friend the Member for West Chelmsford (Mr. Burns), but I have not been yet. This is a small but important group of amendments. As my right hon. Friend said, we are trying to restore the traditional discretion of the courts.

I have a few years' experience of producing legislation in the Home Office, and any legislation that appeared to limit the discretion of the judiciary was always fought hard by it. I suspect that, unless we are willing to contemplate the amendments, when the Bill goes to another place later this afternoon, it may not be so satisfied with legislation that imposes a duty on a court to do something, and uses words such as

"it shall state in open court"

when it prefers discretion. I have not had a chance to consult the Magistrates Association yet, but usually, as a principle, it likes to ensure that any legislation imposing obligations on the court does not tie its hands, but gives it flexibility to impose whatever penalty it wishes beneath a maximum level. Usually, the association does not like minimum penalties. Magistrates like to have that freedom. It is a traditional freedom, and we have got into trouble when trying to limit that discretion.

Clause 1(2) says:

"Subject to subsection (3) below, it shall be the duty of the court to make an international football banning order in relation to the accused if"

the court

"is satisfied that there are reasonable grounds to believe that making the order would help to prevent violence"

and so on. The danger is that when my hon. Friend the Member for West Chelmsford has tied the court's hands in the first line,

"it shall be the duty of the court"

to make a banning order, in borderline cases where judges would have liked to have a discretion they will say, "We do not really want to make the order". Instead, they will rule that the evidence was not good enough and that they were not satisfied that there were reasonable grounds for making an order. That is not a corruption of justice; it is an inevitable part of our human nature.

Mr. Burns: May I put another scenario to my right hon. Friend? The courts may decide that the offence that the individual has committed is not serious enough to warrant a banning order, so, using their discretion,

they do not impose one. They then give their reasons and make the precise point that they do not consider that the offence was serious enough to warrant the issue of a banning order. Is not that the way around the problem that is exercising my right hon. Friend so much?

Mr. Maclean: I do not think that it is. I take the subsection as it is presented in the Bill, and as my hon. Friend has proposed it. He needs to come up with a different form of words to ensure that, in all cases where the evidence is clear cut and any person in their right mind would impose a banning order, the courts would do so. He is trying to tie the courts' hands in a way that they will try to escape; they will use the second part of the clause to get out of imposing a banning order in those borderline cases. They will merely state that they were not satisfied that there were reasonable grounds for imposing one.

Mr. Burns: The proposal is that it should be the duty of the court to make an order if it is satisfied that there are reasonable grounds to believe that making the order would help to prevent violence or disorder at designated football matches. If the court regards the offence of which the person has been convicted as relatively minor within that ambit, it may feel that the individual will not cause violence or disorder at a future match, and will not issue the order. The court will then give the reasons. That is perfectly reasonable.

Mr. Maclean: It may be pedantic but my concern is that, by using the words "shall be the duty", my hon. Friend will increase the likelihood that the courts will use the excuse that the potential is negligible or that there are not reasonable grounds. Courts and magistrates do not like being tied strictly to an obligation to impose a particular sentence, because there will be borderline cases where they think that the sentence is not appropriate. The clause allows the court to deal with borderline cases, which cannot use a discretionary power, only by exaggerating the last part of the clause—by saying that it does not believe that the order will help to prevent violence or disorder, or that the grounds are not substantial.

Mr. Tony Clarke: Does the right hon. Gentleman accept that we are simply trying to bring clarity to the decision-making process of the court? Does he further accept that the judiciary sometimes gets it wrong? Until December 1998, only three international banning orders had been made. That was in a year when we witnessed terrible scenes of trouble in France during the world cup, perpetrated by so-called England fans. Does not that prove that, so far, the judicial process has failed? The hon. Member for West Chelmsford (Mr. Burns) is seeking to bring clarity by determining which offences would and would not warrant an international banning order.

Mr. Maclean: I am always keen to have clarity in the law, and this House has, over the years, tried to bring clarity to the law. However, the proposal will not necessarily cause an increase in international banning orders, as the hon. Gentleman suggests. If one wants to get a lot of people banned, there is no point in giving the court the power to be satisfied that there are reasonable grounds that making the order will prevent violence or disorder.

If a court decides that it is not entirely satisfied, it can say that although the individual concerned may have convictions for affray, hooliganism or violence, on this occasion it does not think that an order will help to prevent violence abroad. The court will not make the order because the person has not satisfied the reasonable grounds provision. Not all courts will behave like that in all circumstances, and the tightening of the law will mean that we can expect more banning orders.

I am merely suggesting to my hon. Friend the Member for West Chelmsford that if one attempts to tie the hands of judges by putting in the words "shall be the duty", the judges—in an attempt to get the liberty not to impose orders—will extend the last half of the proposal and conclude that there are no reasonable grounds.

Time and time again, I have heard the argument that if a sentence appears too severe, the court will not convict. We have heard the argument that if capital punishment were brought back, juries would not convict an obviously guilty person because they did not like the consequences. That applies to a whole range of sentences. If courts, juries and judges do not like the inevitable consequences of a guilty verdict because they do not like the compulsory sentence that they must impose, in borderline cases they will conclude that the person is not guilty after all.

Also, we should not make it compulsory that reasons "shall be" given in open court. I would prefer to use the word "may", which would give the courts the traditional discretion for which they have fought for years—and for which they used to fight me when I, as a Minister, tried to take it away. In another place, more attention will be paid to that.

My right hon. Friend the Member for Bromley and Chislehurst made most of the arguments for the amendments powerfully, and I need not bore the House by repeating them. My hon. Friend the Member for West Chelmsford was in danger of misleading himself when he said that he did not like amendment No. 1 because it says that where a court makes an international football banning order, it "shall state" the reasons for that decision in open court. The amendment was drafted in that way because we wanted it to be consistent with the preceding subsection as we were working on the assumption that my hon. Friend or the Government might not accept our amendment to change "shall" to "may".

Amendment No. 1 would be a sensible addition to the Bill. I profoundly disagree with my hon. Friend the Member for West Chelmsford, who suggested that it might be an awful burden to impose on the judiciary or the magistrates. In the past, we were dealing with three cases, and now we may be dealing with, at most, 100 cases per annum coming before the 30,000 or so magistrates in this country.

There is already an obligation in the Bill that the court "shall state" in open court where it is not satisfied. I hardly think that it is a great burden if the court has to make a simple statement when it has imposed an international banning order. Courts must do that in a range of cases, particularly in terms of all offences concerning children and young people, in which they must state their reasons in much greater detail.

[Mr. Maclean]

I strongly urge amendment No. 1 on the House, but if my hon. Friend the Member for West Chelmsford and the Minister continue to resist it, I would not wish to waste the time of the House by dividing on it. However, I hope that it will be considered seriously in another place.

Mrs. Laing: It is comforting that the House is now back to normal and my right hon. Friends the Members for Penrith and The Border (Mr. Maclean) and for Bromley and Chislehurst (Mr. Forth) are in harmonious agreement. I am not, however, in agreement with them. The Opposition support the arguments of my hon. Friend the Member for West Chelmsford (Mr. Burns).

We have before us a very important point of principle on the criminal law. It is important to give sufficient discretion to the courts and to the judiciary. There must be some discretion in the way in which judges or magistrates deal with the law in making a judgment after considering the particular circumstances of a case, but it is up to the House to make the laws for them to interpret. That important distinction is often overlooked when we are considering the extent to which the courts should be bound by the letter of the law.

It is important to get the balance of discretion right in any Act of Parliament, and I feel strongly that the Bill as it stands allows sufficient discretion. The Opposition do not support the amendment.

12 noon

Kate Hoey: The Government feel that the amendment would weaken the Bill. It would be wrong to remove the duty placed on courts to make banning orders when a football-related offence has been committed and they are satisfied that there are reasonable grounds to believe that an order would help to prevent violence. It is very important to remember what happened when the courts had discretion: in December 1997, there were only nine restriction orders in force and it was clear that the courts were not using the discretion available to them. They did not even seem to realise that they could impose the orders.

The Home Secretary had to write to the Magistrates Association and point out that such orders were available, and by the end of June 1998 the number in force went up to about 60; it is now about 150. Those may still be relatively low numbers, but it is important that we say that, when the evidence is there and the courts are satisfied that the person has been convicted of a football-related offence, an order should be imposed.

The courts will still have discretion and I do not think that they will be so terrified of issuing banning orders that they will refuse to convict, as the right hon. Member for Penrith and The Border (Mr. Maclean) seems to imply. Our magistrates are not like that and we would not expect them to act in that way.

I hope that the right hon. Member for Bromley and Chislehurst (Mr. Forth) will withdraw the amendment. If there is such strong feeling in the other place, presumably the matter will be discussed there, but I do not think that the amendment is necessary. It would water down the Bill, and the hon. Member for West Chelmsford (Mr. Burns) has clearly put the case why the provision should remain as it stands.

Mr. Forth: The argument is about how far we in the legislature are prepared to trust the judiciary. The Minister has made it clear that she believes that the judiciary can often fail properly to interpret Parliament's views. Interestingly, she said that, if given a bit of a nudge by the Home Secretary of the day, the courts may buck up their ideas and start to realise that penalties are available of which they were previously unaware. That provides a counter-argument, as it suggests that the wording in the Bill may not be necessary.

For the sake of making progress—but reluctantly, I must admit—I will not press the amendment to a vote, but I want to put down a marker and say that we should all think about this matter very seriously.

Mrs. Laing: Does my right hon. Friend agree, as a point of principle, that it is up to Parliament to make laws and that if too much discretion is given to the courts we will end up with judges making laws, which must be wrong?

Mr. Forth: I am not sure about that. I understand exactly the point that my hon. Friend is making, but the principle may lead in directions which, to some people, seem very threatening. Some people may, for example, want to bring back mandatory hanging for sheep stealing—perhaps that is a good example of the point that she was making—although I suspect that, currently, the majority view is that that would be unwise, and that it is always better to leave the discretion at the point at which the knowledge exists: the court, which has had its proceedings and taken full account of the circumstances, mitigating or otherwise.

I therefore remain to be convinced that it is proper for this place, and Parliament generally, to constrain the courts by stating in too much detail what they will or will not do. Hon. Members do not sit in the courts, on the jury or on the magistrates' bench. Now that I think of it, some of my hon. and learned Friends are on the bench, but most of us are not.

I do not wish to delay the House, and I am sure that we shall return to the argument on another occasion. I therefore beg to ask leave to withdraw the amendment.

Amendment, by leave, withdrawn.

Mr. Forth: I beg to move amendment No. 12, in page 2, line 4, leave out 'absolutely or'.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: With this, it will be convenient to discuss amendment No. 24, in clause 6, page 8, line 1, leave out 'absolutely or'.

Mr. Forth: The House will be relieved to know that amendment No. 12 deals with only a narrow—but important—point and need not detain us for too long. I really am quite worried about the vording in this part of clause 1(3). My amendment is therefore a probing one, so that I may clarify and ensure that I—and, therefore, the House—fully understand what my hon. Friend the Member for West Chelmsford (Mr. Burns) and the Government understand to be thrus of the provision.

Clause 1(3) states:

"An international football banning order may only be made—

(a) in addition to a sentence imposed in respect of the offence of which the accused is (or was) convicted".

In other words, a banning order may be in addition to a conviction. The clause goes on, however, to provide that an order may be made

"(b) in addition to an order discharging him absolutely or conditionally."

That is what worries me.

I can certainly appreciate the point of imposing a banning order subsequent to a conviction. I can also fully appreciate—although I am less happy about it—imposing a banning order in addition to an order conditionally discharging someone. Although I am no legal expert, I assume that a conditional discharge entails an element of guilt, and that a banning order would therefore be related to an act containing at least an element of guilt.

I part company with the Bill—this is the point of amendment No. 12—where it provides that a banning order may be made when someone has been discharged absolutely, as I really wonder whether that is the proper way to proceed. It seems to me—as a non-legal expert—that, if someone has been absolutely discharged, they have not been convicted and are not guilty of the offence.

In those circumstances, I cannot for the life of me see how one can justify imposing an international banning order—unless we are back to where we started in the debate and are saying, "We haven't been able to convict you in this case, or even to impose a conditional discharge—we are discharging you absolutely. But we don't much like the look of you, or your friends. These NCIS people are telling us that there's something pretty flaky about you, and that your behaviour is peculiar. We therefore have some reason to restrict your freedom. So, under the powers given to us by the Bill, we shall impose an international banning order, although you have been absolutely discharged." That really would be too much.

The provision would—as we have found time and again in the Bill, in provisions curtailing the court's discretion or dealing with people with or without convictions—tilt the balance too much. One of the traditions of our law is the presumption of innocence until proven otherwise, but here we have a provision that would mean that even if a person had been absolutely discharged, the courts would still have the power to restrict his freedom. I hope that I have misunderstood the position, because I find it unacceptable.

Mr. Maclean: I confess to the House that although I support my right hon. Friend the Member for Bromley and Chislehurst (Mr. Forth) on a range of his amendments, my name should not appear in the list of supporters of this amendment. I did not study this amendment carefully when my right hon. Friend showed it to me and I told the Clerks in the Table Office that I would happily sign all his amendments. I must part company from my right hon. Friend on this amendment.

An absolute discharge is still a conviction. I have never considered absolute discharges a sensible sentence in English law. If someone is convicted, they should face some penalty, however slight. Nevertheless, while the concept of an absolute discharge remains, it is still a conviction. It is not a finding of not guilty or of innocence: it is a finding of guilt where the court, in its infinite stupidity, declines to impose a sentence. The only penalty is that the person still has the stigma of having been convicted by the court. The hope is that someone who has been absolutely discharged will not repeat the offence because he will know that he will face a much heavier sentence next time.

An absolute discharge is a conviction without a sentence, so it would be inconsistent to remove it from the Bill. If we were to do so, people who were convicted and given a £10 fine or a few hours' community service would be caught by the legislation, but someone given an absolute discharge for the same offence would not be caught. At the lower end, some of the penalties for the football-related offences are very slight. A few hours' community service or a £10 fine do not rank much higher than an absolute discharge.

Mr. Forth: I am following my right hon. Friend's argument closely, as ever. Is he saying that if someone has been found technically guilty, but the court recognises that the offence is so minor that it does not require any penalties, such a severe restriction of freedom as an international banning order is still justified?

Mr. Maclean: If there is a fault in the system, it is the existence of the absolute discharge. If my right hon. Friend is successful in the private Members' ballot next year and introduces a measure to abolish the absolute discharge, I shall be happy to support it. However, the absolute discharge currently exists and courts can and will impose it.

By the way, this is not a matter of technical guilt: one is either innocent or guilty. Someone may be blatantly guilty but, for some good reason—personal circumstances or the feeling of the court that the person is highly unlikely to offend again, which is often the case when absolute discharges apply—the court may decide not to impose a financial or any other penalty. If the court wants the conviction to stand, it imposes an absolute discharge.

12.15 pm

Mr. Forth: If the court has been persuaded that an individual is highly unlikely to repeat an offence, how on earth can one justify an international banning order? The point of such an order is to ban someone who is likely to do something unpleasant, but my right hon. Friend has just said that absolute discharges are given to people who the court reckon will not do something unpleasant. We cannot have it both ways.

Mr. Maclean: Different courts and time scales are involved. When a court gives a person an absolute discharge, it does so for one of many reasons. A court examines an offence, convicts the person who it is convinced committed it, and then disposes of that person in one of many ways—by means of a term of imprisonment, a fine, community sentence or custody. Alternatively, it may grant an absolute discharge. One of the dozens of possible reasons for that decision may be that, in the opinion of the court, that person is unlikely to commit another offence.

Weeks, months or years later, that person may come before a different court because there is a possibility that he will be involved in football violence. That new court will have to consider whether the terms of clauses 1 or 6 are satisfied, and whether an international or domestic banning order is appropriate. In such circumstances, the new court may conclude that, as the earlier absolute

[Mr. Maclean]

discharge is still a conviction, a banning order may be appropriate because the person has not behaved himself in the interim.

I am conscious of the point that my right hon. Friend makes, which is that an absolute discharge feels like no penalty at all. The only penalty faced by a person given an absolute discharge is the fact that the discharge is still a conviction: that person has been convicted of an offence for which a financial penalty or a period in custody has not been imposed. Nevertheless, an absolute discharge remains a conviction and so has to be included if this part of the Bill is to be logical and consistent.

My right hon. Friend may say that absolute discharges are a load of nonsense and should be reformed. I agree, but we cannot do that in this Bill. While the absolute discharge remains available to courts as a sentence and a penalty, we must include it in this Bill. I sincerely apologise to my right hon. Friend that I did not study the amendment carefully enough when I signed up to it. I studied it in more detail overnight, and I have to oppose it.

Mr. Burns: I do not want to disappoint my right hon. Friend the Member for Bromley and Chislehurst (Mr. Forth), but I share the views of my right hon. Friend the Member for Penrith and The Border (Mr. Maclean).

This is a narrow point, but my right hon. Friend the Member for Bromley and Chislehurst rightly said, when moving the amendment, that this part of the Bill applies to international and domestic banning orders with regard to people who have been given absolute discharges. However, my right hon. Friend supported the Public Order Act 1986, which provided that exclusion orders—the old domestic banning orders—covered people who had received absolute discharges. This part of the Bill merely provides that people on whom international banning orders are imposed will be treated in the same way that the 1986 Act treats people in relation to domestic banning orders.

I hope that that goes some way towards reassuring my right hon. Friend the Member for Bromley and Chislehurst about the consistency of the proposal.

Mr. Forth: I am grateful for that, but I am a bit worried about the approach adopted by my hon. Friend and by my right hon. Friend the Member for Penrith and The Border (Mr. Maclean). The implication is that I must always and absolutely support measures that I have previously supported in the brief time since I entered the House in 1983. Nothing could be further from the truth. My hon. Friend has been in the House for a considerable period, and he will know that we can all look back and regret what we have done. All of us change our hearts or minds sometimes. Even as eminent a person as the Prime Minister has been known to change his mind on the odd occasion. If we look back at what the right hon. Gentleman thought in, for example, 1983, we can detect a few differences because he has since taken a more mature judgment. My hon. Friend may know that I thought something was a good idea in my impetuous youth, but now that I am a statesman, I may not necessarily agree with it any more.

Mr. Burns: I fully accept that point. Let me try to reassure my right hon. Friend. My right hon. Friend the Member for Penrith and The Border made a cogent case, but I shall try to clarify matters further. If a court considers an absolute discharge to be the appropriate disposal, it may be satisfied that the person involved is unlikely to be involved in future disorder. The court would not necessarily issue a banning order in such a case, although, as a result of the amendments that we discussed earlier, the court would have to give a reason for not issuing an order.

For that reason, the amendment moved by my right hon. Friend the Member for Bromley and Chislehurst is not necessary, and it would not enhance the Bill. I urge him to withdraw it in the light of what my right hon. Friend the Member for Penrith and The Border has said.

Mrs. Laing: Once again, we are in the uncomfortable position of hearing my right hon. Friends the Members for Penrith and The Border (Mr. Maclean) and for Bromley and Chislehurst (Mr. Forth) disagree. Once again, we must consider how the amendment would work. It may be appropriate that no penalty should be imposed in some cases, even where a person is found guilty. However, the purpose of a banning order is to prevent future offences. It may therefore be appropriate, if an unconditional discharge is imposed, for the court to have the power to impose a banning order to prevent future offences. I agree, therefore, with my hon. Friend the Member for Chelmsford, West (Mr. Burns), and I hope that my right hon. Friend the Member for Bromley and Chislehurst will withdraw his amendment.

Mr. Forth: The amendment offers a clear example of why a non-lawyer intervenes in these matters at his peril. I confess that I am not a lawyer and that I have no legal training or experience—in the lack of which I am in distinguished company. My right hon. Friend the Member for Penrith and The Border is virtually a lawyer by dint of his long and distinguished service at the Home Office, and he knows much more about these matters than I can ever hope to. I wholeheartedly accept what he has said. He placed his trust in my wording of this modest amendment, but I had betrayed his trust because my assumptions were mistaken. I am grateful to my hon. Friend the Member for West Chelmsford for correcting me so courteously, and even more grateful to the Minister for not rubbing salt into the wound. I beg to ask leave to withdraw the amendment.

Amendment, by leave, withdrawn.

Mr. Maclean: I beg to move amendment No. 2, in page 2, line 13, at end insert—

'(6) Any person placed under a duty to report to a police station as specified in an order under subsection (5) above shall have the right of appeal to the court within fourteen days of the imposition of the order.'.

I have pleasure in moving the amendment, which stands in the name of my right hon. Friend the Member for Bromley and Chislehurst (Mr. Forth) and myself. On this occasion, I can perhaps make amends for not managing to talk to my right hon. Friend properly in the past few days to advise him on the latent faults in the previous amendment. I have great pleasure in supporting him on this occasion because this amendment is on exactly the right track. It is consistent with the spirit of civil liberties that he has espoused this morning and, at last, it deals with a right of appeal, about which he is very keen.

The amendment would provide for a right of appeal within 14 days against the imposition of a requirement to report to a police station under a banning order. The House will be aware that the Bill as drafted places a duty on a person who is subject to a reporting requirement under such an order to report to a specified police station in England or Wales. At present, the person concerned can report to any police station without prior agreement or notice, which does not hinder travel.

This little amendment is important. Its aim is to ensure that, should a police station be specified to which it is in practice unreasonable or difficult for the person to report, an appeal would be possible. In the vast generality of cases, there should be no problem. It is highly likely that the police station specified will be near the individual's home or work, or in many cases both as those will not be too far apart.

One of the worrying aspects of football hooliganism is that some of the people convicted have, unfortunately, hailed from Carlisle. They were involved in some ghastly football violence. I said "unfortunately" because Carlisle is next door to my constituency and one likes to think that we do not do that sort of thing up there. However, there was a nasty pocket of football hooligans in Carlisle.

One such hooligan, who was targeted at Euro 96 or the world cup, had a business. In fact, a few of the hooligans were business men. They travelled and had company cars. I cannot remember what business they were in, so I will not say whether it was insurance, banking or whatever, but it was a highly respectable business and they were apparently highly respectable and successful business men, which just goes to show that hooligans are not all the mindless morons about whom my hon. Friend the Member for West Chelmsford (Mr. Burns) talks. They are mindless morons when they get involved in violence, but some of them are not merely lager-swilling louts who sit in a pub all day doing nothing; they are successful business men and hooliganism is a dark and sinister side to their characters.

I have no truck with such people. If they commit an offence, I am happy for them to be locked up for as long as the court thinks appropriate. However, if a reporting restriction is to be imposed, the last thing that I want is for those people to lose their jobs or find it impossible to continue in their work and to become a new burden on the state. If they are travellers or computer salesmen, or if their job is to travel throughout the country, I want to ensure that they can appeal to change the police station to which they report or to bring some flexibility into the system.

Mr. Mark Oaten (Winchester): Might not the fear of losing one's job act as an extra deterrent? In a sense, the amendment would make it easier for such people to offend without fear of losing their jobs.

Mr. Maclean: I entirely disagree. That concept is not built into the amendment. Losing one's job is not a penalty in the Bill. If we want to build that into the legislation we should do so, but we should not make loss of employment an accidental facet of a requirement to report to a police station. That requirement is in the Bill so that the police can keep tabs on hooligans. The police know that they are reporting to the station and not going overseas or somewhere else to commit violence. That measure is not built into the Bill as a threat to their employment, which is a different concept. If fear of losing one's job is to be the deterrent, I am happy with that. If we are going to make it part of the sanction that hooligans face a danger of losing their jobs, we should have the guts to build it into the legislation. If they go to prison or custody, they may lose them anyway. Depending on their business, people may be dismissed for certain offences. Companies will not want to employ people with convictions for violence.

12.30 pm

The provision is a simple, sensible, reporting requirement, and I am merely saying that while that is all right for most working people, many are now taken away by their work, such as salesmen or contract workers. It is not only building site workers but computer contract workers and electrical engineers. If their job means that they can be suddenly taken away, they should be able to get the police station to which they have to report changed to make it more convenient and avoid putting their employment at risk.

I hope that my hon. Friend the Member for West Chelmsford will not say that my amendment will weaken the Bill, because it will not dilute it. It is not a wrecking amendment. If he rejects it, I will not press it to a vote and risk damaging the Bill, but it is sensible to give people whose work means that the police station may have to be changed a right of appeal. If he has a better way to build in such flexibility, I would be happy to accept it.

Mr. Burns: I reassure my right hon. Friend that I am not going to say that his amendment seriously weakens the Bill. I hesitate to say this, because as Ministers we all too often said it; and now in opposition, I find that Ministers say it to me so often that it drives me to drink but, sadly, the amendment is defective. There is a right of appeal in respect of the issue of an order. I appreciate that that was not his point but I hope that he is reassured on that.

On my right hon. Friend's narrow point about a right of appeal in respect of the police stations to which people are designated to report, unfortunately his amendment is defective, because the duty to report is within five days of making the order where as his amendment refers to 14 days. That is no big deal, because if we accepted the principle and its urgency we could adjust it.

I wish to reassure my right hon. Friend about the nub of his argument. When an order is being imposed and the arrangements are being made about the police station to which a person has to report, there is an opportunity for that person to discuss them with the courts and the police to ensure that they are convenient and do not impose undue hardship. In making orders, the courts will not be giving additional punishment by imposing the most complicated arrangements to cause

[Mr. Burns]

problems for people but ensuring that they turn up at the right time and place to surrender their passports so that the law is implemented and effective.

Mr. Maclean: Does my hon. Friend accept that the police and the person involved can discuss it until they are blue in the face and pick the best police station, but that that will not help if he is sent by his work to the north of Scotland for two weeks or told that his job will take him around the country? The work force are more mobile than ever before. How does the Bill tackle that?

Mr. Burns: I appreciate that. The individual can ask for further consideration to be given to genuinely changing circumstances. However, my right hon. Friend will also have come across individuals who seek to avoid their responsibilities. The Child Support Agency is an example of some people having become highly skilled at abusing the law and the requirements imposed on them to the nth degree. If one is not careful, under this measure, individuals would abuse that position and would try to bring the law into disrepute and make it less effective than Parliament wants it to be. On those grounds, I ask my right hon. Friend to reconsider the matter and to withdraw the amendment.

Mr. Forth: I am now rather confused. Normally, our little debates help to clarify matters—as did the previous debate—but I am somewhat confused by the remarks of my hon. Friend the Member for West Chelmsford (Mr. Burns). To say—as has been said—that we should not worry too much about the measure, as it is not intended to be penal, and that we do not intend to make it difficult or inconvenient for the individual, but rather to make it as easy as possible, strikes me as slightly bizarre in the context of our debate.

All morning, we have been told about individuals who have committed the most ghastly and heinous acts and are a threat to society. Now, we are told that we are trying to find the most convenient outcome for such people. That strikes me as somewhat odd. Perhaps it is typical of the court leniency that has been mentioned during the debate. However, that matter is for another day. The more I consider it, the more I am tempted by the suggestion of my right hon. Friend the Member for Penrith and The Border (Mr. Maclean): that were I—God forbid—ever to come high enough in the ballot for private Members' Bills, that subject might merit my attention.

Be that as it may, I am not clear about the object of the exercise. I guess that it is to prevent certain persons from going to football grounds—that is the most obvious object—but I am distressed to hear that there is no intention to subject them to any penal element. I am even more confused by my hon. Friend the Member for West Chelmsford saying, in effect, "Don't worry, because the individual will be able to discuss the matter and make representations about it during the court proceedings". Of course, he will—or, at least, I hope so—because that is what judicial proceedings are all about. If the matter were so simple, we should never need the right of appeal in any case.

According to what my hon. Friend said, we need only tell the accused individual that, during the court proceedings, he and his legal representative would be able to make all the points they wanted; they could ask the court to take this or that into consideration and should trust the court because it would all turn out all right.

Mr. Burns: I obviously made my point inadequately and it caused confusion. What is important is that a police station is designated to which an individual has to report. That individual will be able to ask the court to take certain factors into consideration in determining a police station at which attendance would not cause an undue penalty. On the other side of the coin, if a court convicts and sentences someone to a prison sentence, I am sure that my right hon. Friend would not expect the court to start discussing with the prisoner at which prison it would be convenient for him to serve his sentence.

Mr. Forth: I thought that was not part of the penalty. We cannot have it both ways. If it is to be part of the penalty, I should build a large police station in Stornoway and insist that everyone reported there. That would have the required effect. However, that, apparently, is not what we are saying. We are saying, "Don't worry. You will be asked to report to a police station, but it will be very convenient and probably warm; you might even get a cup of tea when you go there." The way things are going, I should not even be surprised by that. It must be one thing or the other—either it is part of the penalty or it is not. If it is not part of the penalty, that is a different matter.

If the idea is simply to make sure that individuals are where we want them to be at a particular time, to prevent them from going anywhere near a football match—although why anyone would want to go near a football match is quite beyond my comprehension, but apparently there are those who do—we are in different territory altogether.

Mr. Burns: I hesitate to intervene as I do not want to delay the debate and talk out my Bill. However, I hope that my right hon. Friend realises that the measure refers to international football banning orders. If a court imposed such an order, an individual would have to turn up at a police station not less than five days before a match to hand in his passport, to prevent him from travelling overseas where he could cause problems at the football match or in the surrounding area. The provision merely states that the courts have to sort out a police station for the person to go to at a certain time. Of course the courts will try to find a police station that is convenient to the individual, so that it gives no further encouragement to the individual not to comply with the banning order.

Mr. Forth: It is getting worse and worse—we have not got to the cup of tea yet, but I sense that it is imminent.

However, we need not fall out over this matter. I was persuaded by the arguments of my right hon. Friend the Member for Penrith and The Border, whose knowledge of police stations is far greater than mine as a result of his having been in far more of them than I have, and I defer to him in this case. The more I hear from my hon. Friend the Member for West Chelmsford the more worried I become, however, because it all seems very soft and easy going; but I shall not prolong my comments on amendment No. 2 because I am anxious to reach the amendment dealing with the surrender of passports, which will be another debate altogether. I shall be guided on this

occasion, as on so many others, by my right hon. Friend the Member for Penrith and The Border, but I am not entirely convinced.

Mr. Maclean: I, too, am not convinced by the arguments of my hon. Friend the Member for West Chelmsford (Mr. Burns). I am not convinced, although I am willing to be corrected by the Minister or anyone else, that handing in the passport is the sole purpose of specifying a police station. The court can impose any conditions it thinks fit, and I was under the impression that specifying the police station to which the person must report might involve more than a single visit to hand in a passport: for example, there could be a requirement that the person should report there regularly.

However, I see from head movements in the Chamber that I am wrong and my hon. Friend is right, but even if he is right and the purpose of specifying the police station is solely to do with the handing in of the passport, it makes sense to introduce a degree of flexibility to deal with a small number of cases. For example, say it is decided for a person who lives and works in Penrith that Penrith will be the reporting station where he must hand in his passport five days before a football match. Say that person then discovers that he is being sent to work on a contract in the Devon and Cornwall police area. Surely it should be fairly simple to specify a police station in Devon or Cornwall.

Such cases may constitute only a tiny minority, but I am not entirely convinced that there are powerful arguments against their being provided for. I am not in the business of diluting the Bill or making life inconvenient for the police; nor am I in the business of allowing people a right of appeal to change the police station where they must hand in their passport every other day and around every single police station in the country. I accept that there would be clever fly-boys who would try to make a mockery of the law by taking advantage of such flexibility.

However, as I said, we would be dealing with only a small number of people, all of whom would be on the NCIS computer and that of their local police force. With the police national network up and running and all the digital communications that were installed under the previous Government, on which the current Government are no doubt building, it should be quite possible for the police services of the UK, which are all now in touch with each other, simply to effect a change—for example, that the reporting station for an individual has been moved from Penrith to Penzance.

Nevertheless, today is not the day when I shall try to persuade my hon. Friend the Member for West Chelmsford to deal with that point. I suspect that, when the Bill goes to the other place, their lordships in their infinite wisdom will conclude that the matter deserves their attention. At that time, my hon. Friend may have to table an amendment—one that is more correctly drafted than my own—to deal with this small but important point. It is the small but important improvements that give us the best criminal justice legislation in the world, which is why we should never be afraid to deal with the small issues as well as the mega-issues. However, since I do not intend to pursue the matter today, I beg to ask leave to withdraw the amendment.

Amendment, by leave, withdrawn.

Clause 2

Relevant offences

12.45 pm

Mr. Forth: I beg to move amendment No. 3, in page 3, leave out lines 20 to 25.

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Mr. Michael J. Martin): With this, it will be convenient to discuss amendment No. 4, in page 3, leave out lines 27 to 29.

Mr. Forth: These amendments have two quite different aspects that are important in their own right. One of them refers, coincidentally, to a comment made by my right hon. Friend the Member for Penrith and The Border (Mr. Maclean), who reminded the House that the more difficult it is to define an offence, the more difficult it is to obtain a conviction. We are well into that territory here.

In his enthusiasm to make this Bill as all-embracing as possible and to ensure that individuals can be caught in several different ways, my hon. Friend the Member for West Chelmsford (Mr. Burns) has excelled himself. This clause contains a definition of offences, which includes

"any attempt, conspiracy or incitement to commit that offence"

and references to

"aiding and abetting, counselling or procuring the commission of that offence."

I have scant knowledge of the law, but I believe that it is well known that it is difficult to obtain a conviction for the offence of conspiracy—and rightly so. That is because one is involved in all sorts of areas that are rarely subject to the normal availability of evidence and so on. Cases are based much more on hearsay evidence, subjective judgment and the like.

The Bill contains an even less easy definition, which is

"any attempt, conspiracy or incitement"

on the one hand, and

"aiding and abetting, counselling or procuring the commission of that offence"

on the other. I am worried that, if that definition remains in the Bill, it may encourage the misuse of resources by the shady NCIS organisation, which has untrammelled surveillance and other powers about which I am becoming increasingly alarmed. I am sure that, if I were summoned to attend upon NCIS, I might never emerge from the building.

I am concerned that if those words remain in the Bill, that will encourage the authorities—I am not keen on that word, but at least it is more neutral and less pejorative—to spend an enormous amount of time and energy pursuing those offences that are so poorly defined. One can imagine setting out to prove in a court of law that someone had attempted to conspire or incited to commit one of the related offences or, worse, aided and abetted, counselled or procured the commission of an offence.

What does "counselling" the commission of an offence mean? I do not know whether it is a term of art in the law or whether it is a new provision dreamed up by someone. I think I understand "conspiracy" and "incitement"—if pushed, I might even understand "aiding and abetting", but I am not sure whether I will ever understand the legal

[Mr. Forth]

definition or implication of "counselling" the commission of an offence in the context of the individuals about whom we are talking.

All morning, we have heard references to the kinds of odious individuals who are involved in football offences, including disorder. They are mean-minded and violent individuals, and it is a complete mystery to me how counselling the commission of an offence will apply to them.

I might not usually be too worried about that, but we are legislating. If the House is to allow itself to be put in the position of endorsing such wording, the Bill's sponsor and the Minister must be prepared to set out—to satisfy me, if no one else—how they envisage a conviction could be obtained in a court of law for counselling the commission of an offence.

As I have said, I have doubts about "aiding and abetting" and "procuring", to say nothing of "conspiracy" or "incitement". My worry is not only that the provision might encourage the authorities to occupy much of their time and effort in pursuing prosecutions of those offences, but, on the other side of the coin, that the wording could, at worst, draw into the net many individuals who are barely, if at all, involved in the commission of those offences.

It is obvious that most of the right hon. and hon. Members who have participated in these debates have a clear idea of the people with whom they want the Bill to deal: those who commit, or allegedly commit, offences or cause disorder at football matches. When one start to talk about conspiracy, incitement and counselling, we potentially draw in a much wider group of people who have a much more tenuous connection with the offences, and subject them to all the processes that we have been discussing.

I shall give an example. My right hon. Friend the Member for Penrith and The Border is very fond of car parks, and he has been telling us with pride how the shady people of NCIS, with all their intrusive surveillance mechanisms, hang around in car parks and listen to people's conversations. They then finger their collars, whisk them off to a luxurious cell, give them a cup of tea and tell them that they have been nicked.

That would be bad enough, but what worries me about the wording that my amendment seeks to remove is that somebody who may be having an innocent conversation with one of the aforesaid people might readily be drawn into that process. The NCIS man will be waving a copy of this legislation, if it ever becomes an Act, and will say, "Oi mate. I'm having you for counselling the commission of an offence. I saw you in the act of counselling. You were standing in the car park talking to an odious individual, and our high-powered, sensitive devices that intrude on individuals' privacy told me that the conversation that you thought you were conducting privately involved counselling the commission of an offence."

I am slightly overstating the matter to emphasise my point, but I hope that I shall be reassured that what I have described will not happen. That, however, is my reading of the Bill. I suspect that in their enthusiasm for the Bill, its promoter and the Minister have allowed it to be drawn so widely that it has the potential to draw into the process a large number of people. That increases the risk of miscarriages of justice and of court proceedings going wrong. It further strengthens the arguments about rights of appeal that have, rightly, been put forward during the proceedings. I hope that we shall take the issue very seriously and examine it closely.

The Bill's promoter may want to argue that the provision is absolutely essential to the Bill's viability. The Minister may tell me that the provision about conspiracy, incitement, aiding and abetting and, in particular, counselling, is absolutely essential if the Bill is to have the intended effect. I remain sceptical. I should have thought that the panoply of existing law and the huge, shadowy organisation that moves mysteriously in society, trying to identify people of whom it disapproves and to drag them to court, would be quite sufficient, but it seems that we are going even further.

We ought to know much more about that provision. Let me make it clear that I want to delete it. The burden of proof is on those who want to leave those words in the Bill, and it is not unreasonable for me to expect them, particularly my hon. Friend the Member for West Chelmsford, to explain clearly how they believe those words add to the Bill. That is my first concern.

Amendment No. 4 deals with something equally worrying. Clause 2(2)(a) reads:

"For the purposes of paragraphs . . . above—

(a) a person may be regarded as having been on a journey to or from a designated football match whether or not he attended or intended to attend the match".

I think that I understand the purpose of that provision but it gives rise to misgivings on my part. It strikes me that certainties will exist if somebody is in attendance at a football match—presumably with CCTVs everywhere in our lives, he will be spotted. The Minister proudly said earlier that actions captured on video would be beyond doubt. It may be that if an individual attends a match and misbehaves in the way that is defined in the Bill, he can be dealt with legitimately. However, the Bill goes beyond that, obviously deliberately.

I am asking my hon. Friend the Member for West Chelmsford and the Minister whether they are absolutely satisfied that the provisions of this part of the Bill are as they should be and that there is no possibility of serious miscarriages of justice. The subsection is drawn extremely widely:

"a person may be regarded as having been on a journey to or from a designated football match whether or not he attended or intended to attend the match".

That is throwing the net very wide.

This part of the Bill worries me the more I think about it. We are no longer focusing on the people with tattoos who behave outrageously, carrying and using offensive weapons and so on; we are talking about another group. Earlier, we were talking about those who counsel others to do something. It is a bizarre thought that the sort of people who commit the offences with which we are concerned will be subject to counselling. As I have said, I want to hear more about that.

We have moved on to talk about a different and much larger group of people who have not been on the journey to the match and who may or may not have attended it. There is scope within the Bill, if lines 27 to 29 remain in it, to draw into the process people who are entirely innocent, or who are involved only peripherally, or who

are drawn in inadvertently. For example, they may have been travelling with the alleged offenders and, therefore, may be drawn in. There is the potential greatly to complicate the processes that would follow the identification of the alleged offenders.

I need many reassurances about this part of the Bill, which takes the matter much further than it need do or should do. The wording is dangerous and rather loose. I hope that having reflected on it, my hon. Friend the Member for West Chelmsford and, perhaps, the Minister will say, "This is not necessary to the core purposes of the Bill. There are worries here and there are possibilities of things going badly wrong. Therefore, we are prepared to go along with the amendment and take out these parts of the Bill."

Mr. Maclean: Once again, my right hon. Friend the Member for Bromley and Chislehurst (Mr. Forth), with his customary rhetoric and lucidity, has clearly set out our concerns, as reflected in the amendment. That being so, I can be relatively brief.

I could not hope to match my right hon. Friend's eloquence but I share his concerns, which are reflected in amendment No. 3. Clause 2(2) contains the words:

"Any reference to an offence in paragraphs (a) to (q) above includes . . . a reference to any attempt, conspiracy or incitement to commit that offence".

It is a long time since I studied law, but as I have said to the House on numerous occasions, I got out before I was totally corrupted. I am not a qualified lawyer, although I took a law degree in Scotland about 30 years ago. I cannot remember whether a reference to an

"attempt, conspiracy or incitement to commit that offence"

means that the person has been convicted for an attempted offence, an attempted conspiracy or whatever.

1 pm

The point that I am inadequately trying to make is, does the reference to "attempt" or "conspiracy" mean that it is enough for the police to be of the opinion that, whereas others have been charged with an offence of affray or violence or disorder, an individual has been involved in it, attempted to commit it, was conspiring to commit it or incited others to do it but has not been convicted of attempt or conspiracy or incitement? I presume that the references are to people convicted of attempt or conspiracy or incitement.

Mr. Burns *indicated assent.*

Mr. Maclean: Nevertheless, I am concerned that the wording brings a very indistinct category of individuals within the scope of the Bill. The category is not as clear cut as that of those who have been convicted of an offence, and I am not certain that it would be possible or feasible to prosecute an individual on such grounds. Specifically, such a prosecution might be over-dependent on police intelligence, which would be compromised as a result.

Therefore, although the provision may seem to my hon. Friend the Member for West Chelmsford (Mr. Burns) to be a good little catch-all—without it, one may get all those convicted of an offence, but miss someone who has been convicted of an attempt to commit the offence or of conspiracy; and, naturally, my hon. Friend wants to catch those people—he may, by inserting that catch-all, produce an unenforceable piece of legislation.

I do not feel too strongly about amendment No. 3, but the subject is worth exploring. I shall listen if my hon. Friend the Member for West Chelmsford or the Minister say that the safeguard is essential and that many nasty hooligans have been convicted of attempt or conspiracy. I share the law's view that conspiracy and attempted violence are as important as actual violence. In fact, those behind the scenes who are conspiring to commit violence, or aiding and abetting or fomenting it, are often the most evil, and my new clauses 1 and 2 were designed to get at them. I am happy for them to be caught, if that is sensible; I simply want clarification that the provision does not go a stage too far, inserting an unenforceable passage or weakening a sensible and tough provision.

Amendment No. 4 relates to those who are regarded as being on a journey to or from a football match even if they did not attend the match or did not intend to attend the match. It is the second part of that which worries me. Those who did not intend to attend a football match can be deemed to be on the journey to it even when they were not. That could catch innocent people.

The law is obviously trying to catch those who buy tickets to a football match, intending to go to it and to have a punch-up, and those who intend to go into the vicinity of a match—although not attend it—and to have a punch-up nearby. Those people are fair game. I am happy for those football hooligans who have no intention of attending a football match, but intend to be outside the ground or in the pub nearby committing their violence, to be caught. However, I am worried that—as my right hon. Friend the Member for Bromley and Chislehurst eloquently said—the provision could sweep in people who are not football hooligans, but are travelling to the same place at the same time on the same day, or who are in the company of some of those nasty people, but have been swept up in the violence.

My hon. Friend the Member for West Chelmsford may say that if people travel in a minibus alongside violent hooligans, to get a free ride to the town where the football match is taking place, it serves the blighters right if they get swept up. I do not take that view. Sometimes, trains are hired for special outings or events, and the wives or families of those attending the event take advantage of the availability of the hired coach, bus or train to shop or do other activities while others attend the football match. There may be examples of people who are seen to be travelling with football hooligans and nasty scum being innocently swept into the provisions. I hope that my hon. Friend or the Minister can reassure me that that will not be the case.

The amendments are probing, as there are doubts in my mind. I would be happy if my hon. Friend said that had I understood the Bill and the other legislation correctly, I would not have these doubts. However, I would seek an assurance before I am satisfied. I have no intention of weakening the Bill, but I do not wish it to be diminished or discredited by catching a few genuinely innocent people.

My right hon. Friend the Member for Bromley and Chislehurst mentioned counselling. I believe that we are referring to the old-fashioned counselling in the criminal law sense, meaning advising someone to commit an

[Mr. Maclean]

offence. It is not the new-fangled, touchy-feely, "I feel your pain" or "Give me a cuddle" counselling with which the country is now awash. If legislation were proposed to deal with the million new counsellors who give everyone a cuddle every time it rains, I would support it if it meant that they were banned for life and sent to prison. That is the sort of counselling we need to outlaw.

Mr. Forth: I accept what my right hon. Friend says, but does he seriously imagine that the kind of people whom we are told repeatedly commit these offences will be the subject of what he has defined as counselling? I have a mental picture of someone with a shaven head, tattoos and other accoutrements who is about to commit ghastly crimes in the name of being a football supporter. Who will counsel—by whatever definition—that person to do something illegal?

Mr. Maclean: My right hon. Friend has not seen some of the new members of the probation service. That will get me a few letters. My right hon. Friend has misled himself—he has counselled himself unwisely. We are talking not about sitting down and giving these scumbags a cuddle, but about the technical, legal sense of counselling, where someone aids, abets or advises someone to commit an offence. If the other form of counselling were one of the penalties appropriate to these people, I would be worried that the Government had gone really soft on crime.

Kate Hoey: This part of the Bill does not create new offences—we must make that clear. Whether they have been confused with the new form of "counselling" or not, these criminal offences exist. The Bill merely proposes to enable the court to make a banning order if someone is convicted of one those offences.

The amendments would significantly reduce the ability for action to be taken against those who use football as an excuse for their behaviour. Adding to the list of football-related offences the offences of conspiracy and incitement would provide the courts with the ability to take banning order action against those convicted of such offences.

Everyone who knows anything about conspiracy will accept that it is difficult to obtain convictions for offences of that nature. The people most likely to be involved in committing those offences at football matches are those who plan and organise the activities of others. They tend to avoid being the subject of banning orders, for the simple reason that they themselves do not commit the acts of violence or disorder. That is why we can discuss "unconvicted football hooligans". These people will not be caught committing violence or disorder, but they are the motivators, instigators and planners who escape the powers at present available to the courts under existing legislation. The Bill is intended to bring those people within the ambit of the law.

Our original document went out to wide consultation and we were especially interested in the response on this matter. Many respondents who understood what went on behind football violence supported our proposals. The Football Supporters Association, which, along with the National Federation of Football Supporters Clubs, tried to show people that a minority were responsible for the violence, felt that it was important to add conspiracy. We have listened and we think that the provision is necessary.

The Bill is designed to tackle the problem of those who use the environment around football matches to cause trouble and stir up violence. I appreciate that the right hon. Member for Bromley and Chislehurst (Mr. Forth) does not go to football matches, but if he did he would know that many people go without tickets, with no intention of going into the ground; they simply take the build-up of people and the organisation that goes into it as an opportunity to hide behind the vast majority of law-abiding supporters.

Having no intention to attend the match does not, sadly, mean having no intention to cause or be involved in acts of hooliganism around the ground, or on the way to or from the match. By showing that the person's journey was principally in connection with a football match, the provisions will extend the banning order process to those who commit offences outside the ground without any intention of entering it.

I understand why the right hon. Gentleman felt that he should explore the amendments, and in particular amendment No. 4, but I believe that they would weaken the Bill. The genuine, decent supporters prefer the Bill as it stands, so I hope that he will withdraw the amendment.

Mr. Forth: I am grateful to the Minister for that explanation. She said that the offences are not necessarily new, and that, allied with the very helpful explanation from my right hon. Friend the Member for Penrith and The Border (Mr. Maclean), gives me some reassurance that we are on fairly familiar and secure territory in terms of the definition of offences. I can now see, as a non-attender of football matches, that there may be a category of people who are not readily identifiable, but bear a large part of the responsibility for the offences.

I am still not entirely satisfied that there is no danger that a wider group of innocent people might be drawn into the process by the very wide wording in the Bill, but on this occasion I am prepared to give my hon. Friend the Member for West Chelmsford (Mr. Burns) and the Minister the benefit of the doubt. They appear to be sure that the provisions are essential and would not give rise to the risks that my right hon. Friend the Member for Penrith and The Border and I outlined.

I still have my doubts, but I am sufficiently reassured not to press the point. I therefore beg to ask leave to withdraw the amendment.

Amendment, by leave, withdrawn.

Clause 3

CONDITIONS AND DUTY TO REPORT

Mr. Forth: I beg to move amendment No. 16, in page 4, leave out lines 19 to 25.

This is the amendment that I have been waiting for, although I will try not to make a meal of it. I well remember an impassioned speech on Second Reading by my hon. Friend the Member for Lichfield (Mr. Fabricant), who expressed grave reservations about this aspect of the Bill. I am only sorry that he is not with us today. I would have liked to hear the speech again, it was so good. I will try to make up for his absence by my own modest contribution.

I share my hon. Friend's reservations about the surrendering of passports. I know that we can get very misty-eyed about passports. There are those who believe that the British passport—in its excellent old form, as opposed to the dreadful little maroon thing that we are all now stuck with—goes back a long way into our history, but I do not think that it does. The Minister may correct me, but I think that the British passport in its magnificent previous form dated back only to about the 1920s. Be that as it may, the passport was and remains a powerful symbol of a number of different things.

1.15 pm

A passport is not merely something that we possess and are able to show—many authorities, of course, require it to be shown for various purposes—but is an expression of our sense of national pride and identity, which are very important to us. In the context of the Bill and the amendment, however, a passport is the symbol and statement of one's inalienable—at least I thought that it was inalienable—right to travel freely and untrammelled.

Part of our consideration of the Bill should include the extent to which it is necessary to hold and produce a British passport to travel across the European Union. I should like to hear the comments of my hon. Friend the Member for West Chelmsford (Mr. Burns) and of the Minister on whether the compulsory surrender of one's passport would prevent one from travelling across the European Union. Although, in a sense, the point deals with an argument that is the reverse of the one that I want to make, it is relevant to our consideration.

I have heard it argued that one can and should be able to—I have done it myself on one or two occasions—travel throughout the European Union without having to show a passport, and that any other method of identity should be adequate. Are my hon. Friend the Member for West Chelmsford and Ministers sure that, if someone's passport were to be confiscated, that person would be prevented from travelling? It is one important aspect of the argument, although, strictly, not germane to the amendment.

I am much more worried—this is why I tabled amendment No. 16—that the authorities will be able to march in and compulsorily take away one's passport. As I said, I am no great fan of the European convention on human rights, but I know that there are those—not least Liberty—who argue that temporary removal of one's passport may well be a contravention of article 1 of the convention's first protocol. Allowing the authorities to take someone's passport may well be a worry for those who are fans of the convention.

As interestingly, Liberty is also arguing that to require surrender of a passport might conflict directly with our international obligations to guarantee freedom of movement under article 12 of the international covenant on civil and political rights. I never thought that I would hear myself arguing that, as I am not a great fan of the covenant. I always regard that type of thing as international verbiage. I could use a much ruder word, Mr. Deputy Speaker, but you probably would not allow me, and the House will get the sense of what I mean. Nevertheless, hon. Members will need reassurances that, in so far as we think that those guarantees are important, the Bill will not contravene them.

I am really interested in a much more fundamental and British point. How content are we that our authorities should be in the business of taking away our passport and saying that what we always thought was one of our fundamental rights—the freedom of travel—is to be removed? Around the world, people take the view that their right to leave their country is one of their most important freedoms.

I am sure that, internationally, over many decades, if not centuries, we have rather pompously taken that view, and said to people, "We are very proud that our citizens are free to escape from the authorities if they think that they are being unreasonable." Almost the entire United States is populated by the successors of those who sought freedom and escaped not only from countries on the continent—many of whom came to the United Kingdom for their freedom—but from the United Kingdom. Therefore, let us not underestimate the importance of the issue.

Mr. Peter Brooke (Cities of London and Westminster): I am surprised that my right hon. Friend has not alluded to the remarkable statistic that only 12 per cent. of Americans carry passports—which demonstrates that, having got there, they have no desire to return.

Mr. Forth: Indeed. As someone who has recently returned from the United States—voluntarily, I should add—I appreciate exactly what my right hon. Friend is saying. Nevertheless, the fact remains—it is part of the case that I am trying to make—that, for a very long time, we have argued that the ability to leave the country freely and untrammelled is a very important element of individual and political freedoms and of civil liberties. The proposal in this case is that, as part of a penalty and as a guarantee that people will not travel abroad possibly to do things of which we disapprove, we will make them surrender their passports. That is a serious step to take.

The point was made on Second Reading that there is a precedent for such a move. My right hon. Friend the Member for Penrith and The Border (Mr. Maclean) also made the argument, saying, "Don't worry, we've done it before, so it's all right now." I am not sure that it is all right now. The fact that, in a moment of weakness, the Government of whom I was apparently a member allowed the removal of passports does not mean that I can rest easy that we are to do it again. The fact that we have mistakenly done something before does not mean that we should compound the mistake by doing it again.

I am not convinced that as serious a measure is the right step in the context of this Bill. It may be justifiable for offences such as treason or murder, although I would like to hear the arguments and I would not accept them readily. I do not know whether the offences we are contemplating, however awful they appear, justify the power to remove passports. We should not forget that the Bill is called the Football (Offences and Disorder) Bill, and yet we are talking about taking people's passports away. What is the world coming to? Have we lost all reason? Are we out of our minds? Are we suggesting that offences related to football should be dealt with through the compulsory removal of people's passports, which will mean the removal of one of our most sacred rights?

I sense that the Minister will tell me that I should not worry because we can already remove people's passports for many other reasons. I am not convinced by that

[Mr. Forth]

argument. It seems to me that people are not aware that their passports could be removed. It is time that they were. Perhaps this debate will assist in the process and I can expect the streets to be filled tomorrow with angry people saying, "We didn't realise that this country had come to this." Perhaps this is the point at which we should start to reverse the process and say, "This is something up with which we will not put." We should say that we do not believe that the authorities are justified in taking passports away that easily and readily and denying people their freedom to travel and to leave the country, especially if we believe that the authorities are acting unreasonably.

I have been surprised, just in our little debate this morning, by the extent to which the Bill has pushed out the frontiers of the powers of the authorities to encroach yet further on the freedom of individuals. I know that my right hon. Friend the Member for Penrith and The Border will tell me that we have already done it, so we can do it again. That argument is wearing increasingly thin with me and, I suspect, with others.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. I have listened carefully to the right hon. Gentleman and, on occasions, he repeats his case. He makes his points effectively, but it is against the rules of the House to make the case twice in the same go.

Mr. Forth: I am grateful, Mr. Deputy Speaker. The argument has obviously lost its effectiveness, so I had better not pursue it any further. I want to hear a positive and comprehensive case made for these provisions, because if it is not, we should remove them.

Mr. Burns: As my right hon. Friend the Member for Bromley and Chislehurst (Mr. Forth) said, this is a serious matter. His amendment would mean that the courts would not have the power to impose passport surrender as a condition of an international banning order. That goes to the heart of the purpose of this part of the Bill.

I urge my right hon. Friend to think again. The amendment would destroy the Bill's purpose of tightening up international banning orders. My right hon. Friend is right to say that taking away people's right to travel abroad is a serious step, but we must see it in context. The people involved will have been convicted of serious crimes. On the authority of a court, banning orders are imposed to prevent people from travelling abroad, during limited periods, when there is reason to believe that they might repeat the trouble overseas that brought about their conviction in the first place.

Current practice shows that there is no point in imposing a banning order if there is no effective way to enforce it. The only effective enforcement of international banning orders is the withdrawal of passports, albeit for a brief period. Although such orders may be imposed for a number of years, people are not prevented from going abroad on holiday or in pursuit of their personal business. The effect is simply that they are not allowed to have their passports for five days before a match is played abroad.

Mr. Forth: Does my hon. Friend agree that the requirement to report to a police station is equally effective in preventing someone from travelling? In any case, may not a person want to travel abroad legitimately, for urgent family or even business reasons that are quite separate from football?

Mr. Burns: On the first point, in theory my right hon. Friend may have a case. However, current practice does not work, as people do not turn up at police stations when football matches take place. That is why we must tighten the law.

On my right hon. Friend's second point—that genuine family or business reasons may exist that require travel abroad—my response is to say, "Tough." The decision to issue a person with an international banning order preventing him from going to a football match is not taken lightly, but follows a conviction in a court.

It is odd that my right hon. Friend should argue, in effect, that the system should fit in with an individual's personal arrangements. Taking away a passport is a punishment as well as a way of preventing a repetition abroad of acts of violence. We should not roll over like little dogs wanting their tummies tickled to fit in with the arrangements of a person who has committed an offence but who then wants the state to bend over backwards to make it easier for him to travel abroad, even if the purpose is not to attend a football match.

My right hon. Friend is, like me, a member of the party of law and order. I know that he has a genuine desire to protect the vast majority of people who are innocent. He has talked skilfully and reasonably about civil liberties, but I have heard nothing about the civil liberties of the vast majority of innocent people who go to football matches for an afternoon or evening of entertainment but who inadvertently get caught up in the behaviour of the mindless minority that causes so much misery.

We must stiffen our resolve and take the actions that all responsible people, in football and the law, are urging us to take. They want us to give the authorities more powers to prevent the activities of the violent minority.

Finally, I want to reassure my right hon. Friend the Member for Bromley and Chislehurst about the legality of the proposals within European human rights legislation—a matter that came up on Second Reading. Like the Minister, I have sought advice from the Home Office, and can assure my right hon. Friend that the Bill is entirely compatible with European obligations and human rights considerations. I hope that he will be able to withdraw his amendment.

1.30 pm

Mr. Brooke: I have one question to put to the Minister, which my right hon. Friend the Member for Bromley and Chislehurst (Mr. Forth) omitted to ask. I share my right hon. Friend's pride in holding a British passport. My first passport said that Ernest Bevin, His Britannic Majesty's Principal Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs, "requests and requires" in the name of His Majesty, et cetera, and I was able to go bravely abroad holding that passport. I am out of date on the statistics relating to the issuing of passports but one felt greater pride having acquired one's passport from Peterborough, from which it took 40 days to arrive, than one did if it had come from Belfast, where the process took only four days.

My question to the Minister is important. I do not wish to intrude on the Minister's private grief, but inner London Members have been communicating over the past

six months with the Home Office about the passports of constituents that the Home Office has lost. Some 80 per cent. of the passports of Thais—

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. The right hon. Gentleman is perhaps discussing business that might be more appropriately raised on another occasion. The loss of passports and difficulties with the Passport Agency are not entirely relevant to the amendment.

Mr. Brooke: I hesitate to allow even a scintilla of controversy to enter into my relationship with you, Mr. Deputy Speaker, as you have always been extremely kind to me. However, the amendment seeks to remove the provision that the passport

"should be returned . . . as soon as reasonably practicable after the match has taken place."

My right hon. Friend the Member for Bromley and Chislehurst did not ask the Minister for a guarantee that the Home Office—whether through the police or in its own right—will in fact be able to find a passport when its holder comes to ask for its return, and that is the assurance that I seek.

Kate Hoey: I shall respond first to the point made by the right hon. Member for Cities of London and Westminster (Mr. Brooke). Clearly we will not be dealing with huge numbers of passports. The right hon. Gentleman may know that there have been only 150 international banning orders over the past two years. A small number of people will have to leave their passports at a police station, and I am confident that the police will not get themselves into the recent difficulties experienced by the Passport Agency.

I strongly oppose the amendment, as must anyone who has sat through the Second Reading and the Committee debates. It relates to the most crucial part of the Bill. The constituents of the right hon. Member for Bromley and Chislehurst (Mr. Forth) would be the first to tell him that if a court has ordered that someone should be prevented from travelling abroad, that person should be stopped from going. We have not been able to prevent people from travelling, and some of the disgraceful incidents that have occurred in Europe involved people who had been served with international restriction orders.

Prevention has not been possible because of the way in which the orders have operated. The Bill will toughen up the law so that people will have to attend a named police station and hand in their passport five days before a match. If they do not do so, the police will know that they will travel, and something can be done to prevent it. That is the point of the Bill.

Mr. Forth: Can the Minister advise me whether it is possible for someone to travel to other European Union countries without a passport? I am fairly certain that it is possible to move freely in and out of the United Kingdom and among the other countries that are parties to the Schengen agreement without a passport, but with some other satisfactory means of identification. If that were so, it would seriously undermine the effectiveness of the measure that the Minister described.

Kate Hoey: The right hon. Gentleman should be absolutely clear that such people would not be able to get back into the country without a passport. Therefore, they would be choosing to spend the rest of their lives in another country. I understand what he implies, but if we want the law to be upheld, it is important that we find ways to prevent people, as far as is possible, from getting around the law. If this measure is not enacted as drafted, they will be able to do so.

The aim of the measure is not to prevent the individual going about his or her lawful business. That is why the passport must be returned as quickly as possible. Sometimes, it may be returned when the person turns up at the police station to meet the reporting requirement. The location and timing of the match may mean that the person could get the passport back quickly and not have to wait even until the end of the match. We do not envisage that the passport will be retained for any longer than is necessary. That guidance will obviously be issued to police forces.

On the civil liberties aspect, article 12 of the international covenant on civil and political rights protects freedom of movement and the right to leave one's country, as the right hon. Member for Bromley and Chislehurst said. However, that article also allows Governments to restrict the right in the interests of public order and a wide range of other things. Clearly, this Bill and measure relate to that provision. The Government are satisfied that the provisions of the Bill comply with all our obligations under the covenant. I therefore ask the right hon. Gentleman to withdraw the amendment.

Mr. Forth: I am grateful, as ever, to the Minister. Her last point simply reinforces the view that most international agreements are not worth the paper they are written on. If we can comply with some high-sounding, high-falutin', verbose international piece of nonsense and still remove people's passports, it does not say much for the protocol, covenant, convention—call it what you will.

I am not sure that it is that impossible to get back into this country without a passport. I am pretty sure that I have done it myself. I think that if one pitches up at immigration control and can satisfy the officers that one is a bona fide Brit, they will tend to let one in—and so they damn well should, as opposed to some of the other people who are allowed into the country. I do not think that what the Minister said was true, but she may want to take advice on it. It is a matter for another occasion.

This is not either the occasion or the opportunity to take this matter as far as it should be taken. It is prime territory for the other place while it is still fully functioning, fit and feisty. I hope that when Members of the other place consider this Bill, and I am sure that it will shortly proceed there, they will study the provision carefully and satisfy themselves that they would want it to remain in that form in the Bill. I can see some of the strength of what the Minister has said, but I am not totally convinced.

This is not a matter on which I should properly divide the House at this stage. It is sufficient to express my reservations, to allow the provision to remain in the Bill for the time being, but to flag up the fact that it is disproportionate to the aims of the Bill and, therefore, should be seriously considered. On the basis of this short debate, I beg to ask leave to withdraw the amendment.

Amendment, by leave, withdrawn.

Clause 4

DURATION AND TERMINATION OF ORDERS

Mr. Maclean: I beg to move amendment No. 17, in page 6, line 6, leave out 'ten' and insert 'fifteen'.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: With this, it will be convenient to discuss the following amendments: No. 18, in page 6, line 7, leave out 'five' and insert 'seven'.

No. 19, in page 6, line 11, leave out 'six' and insert 'nine'.

No. 20, in page 6, line 12, leave out 'three' and insert 'five'.

No. 21, in page 6, line 16, leave out 'two–thirds' and insert 'one–third'.

No. 25, in clause 8, page 9, line 11, leave out 'one year' and insert 'six months'.

No. 26, in page 9, line 11, leave out 'three' and insert 'five'.

No. 27, in page 9, line 12, at end insert—

'(1A) In section 33 of the 1986 Act (application to terminate order) for subsection (1) substitute—

"(1) A person in relation to whom a domestic football banning order has had effect for at least one–third of the period determined under section 32(1) above may apply to the court which made the order to terminate it.".'.

No. 28, in page 9, line 17, leave out 'six months' and insert 'three months'.

No. 29, in page 9, line 18, leave out 'level 5' and insert 'level 4'.

Mr. Maclean: I shall be brief as we shall reach Third Reading shortly. I want to test the water with these amendments, which seek to increase the minimum and maximum periods for which banning orders can be imposed while allowing appeals for termination of orders to be made earlier. I am giving my hon. Friend the Member for West Chelmsford (Mr. Burns) a chance to toughen the Bill drastically while increasing the court's discretion in using the penalties.

The amendments affect clauses 4 and 8. The Bill provides a maximum period of 10 years for a banning order for someone who has been imprisoned. The amendment suggests 15. In cases not involving imprisonment, the Bill suggests five years and the amendment seven. The minimum periods in the Bill are six years and three years; the amendment suggests nine and five. Clause 8 deals with the period of effect of orders under section 32 of the Public Order Act 1986. It is currently no less than one year and no more than three, whereas I suggest not less than six months and no more than five years. We are lowering one end of the scale while increasing the other.

The other important change allows application for termination of orders to be made earlier, although that is coupled with the possibility of longer maximum sentences. That could be a better way of ensuring that the courts have the powers to impose stiff bans where necessary, but they can choose much longer or shorter periods. If the ban is longer, people will have the right to appeal against it after one third of the period rather than two thirds. The provision increases flexibility while allowing the courts to thump those whom they wish to penalise.

Mr. Burns: I am grateful to my right hon. Friend for his remarks. I hope that he does not feel that I am a wimp. I am tempted, but I do not want to go down that route, however attractive it may be. We must take a balanced and acceptable approach to penalties so that they are not so harsh that people lose sympathy with the general aims of the mechanism. The Bill has the balance right. The penalties both fit the crime and will be seen as reasonable because they allow individuals to go back to the courts to ask, in respect of international banning orders, for the last third of the sentence to be rescinded on the ground of good behaviour. I think that that applies after a year of the sentence has been served in respect of a domestic banning order. I hope that my right hon. Friend will not press the amendment.

Mr. Forth: This is slightly bizarre. My hon. Friend the Member for West Chelmsford (Mr. Burns) was almost frothing at the mouth a moment ago about the need for the severest possible penalties. He came close to accusing me of being a wimp on law and order, to which I am unaccustomed. Now he says that we must not go too far or be too harsh and that the penalties are all right.

My right hon. Friend the Member for Penrith and The Border (Mr. Maclean) said that we have to satisfy ourselves about proportionality and appropriateness. We are prepared to take the drastic step of removing someone's passport; we have just been told that that is essential to make the Bill work. However, we must also consider what will be left of the discretion of the courts. What will be available to them to ensure that appropriate penalties are applied? If nothing else, the maxima will give some guidance to the courts about what we had in mind in legislating.

As I argued earlier, we should not tie the hands of the courts too much. If we were to set severe maximum penalties, that would show the courts that some of the offences that might be committed under the provisions of the Bill were so serious as to merit severe penalties. However, for some reason, the promoter of the Bill does not seem to think so. He seems to think that it is one thing casually to take away someone's passport, but another thing to send a person to prison for a long time. That does not show much consistency. However, I shall again defer to the superior experience of my right hon. Friend the Member for Penrith and The Border and be guided by him, although I remain somewhat uneasy.

1.45 pm

Mr. Maclean: I am glad that my right hon. Friend the Member for Bromley and Chislehurst (Mr. Forth) made those points in his customary lucid style. I too was uneasy about the response of my hon. Friend the Member for West Chelmsford to the amendments. It seems inconsistent to go to the extreme step of taking away a person's passport, but not to allow the courts the freedom to increase the period of the banning order from 10 to 15 years. I was not even proposing a compulsory maximum; I merely wanted to give the courts that extra flexibility in the cases of those vile hooligans to whom my hon. Friend is strongly opposed. In those cases, the court could determine that a 15-year ban might be appropriate.

I suspect that the House will have to deal with this matter again when the Bill returns from another place. In the interests of making progress, I shall not force the matter today, but I suspect that the noble Lords at the other end of the Corridor may take a different view. My hon. Friend has not persuaded me. He said that he was almost tempted to accept the amendment. I hope that, if he is presented with amendments to the Bill when it returns from the other place, he will be prepared to accept some of them—in order to give the courts greater flexibility and freedom to impose tougher sentences, if they want to do so.

As I shall clearly not make further progress today and the House wants to move on to other matters, I beg to ask leave to withdraw the amendment.

Amendment, by leave, withdrawn.

Order for Third Reading read.

1.47 pm

Mr. Burns: I beg to move, That the Bill be now read the Third time.

I am delighted to have had the opportunity to pilot this important measure through the House. I am proud to have been associated with it. After the obscene behaviour in France last year and because of the far too many occasions in this country when a small band of mindless hooligans have caused so much damage, not only to the reputation of football but to the enjoyment of other people—the vast majority of law-abiding football supporters—we need to take action to block loopholes in the law in respect of racist and indecent chanting. We also need to give the police, the courts and the authorities greater powers to bring to book and to punish those who indulge in that sort of unacceptable and illegal behaviour.

I shall not detain the House for long, but I want to pay tribute to my right hon. Friends the Members for Penrith and The Border (Mr. Maclean) and for Bromley and Chislehurst (Mr. Forth) for the way in which they have raised a series of important issues during Report. They gave the House the opportunity to debate matters of concern to them and to some other hon. Members.

I am grateful that a large majority of hon. Members on both sides of the House agree with the Bill—as do interested parties outside the House, ranging from the Football Association, the Football Supporters Association and others to the law enforcement agencies and the National Criminal Intelligence Service. The Bill does not cause party political divisions, so I also pay tribute to, and thank, the Under-Secretary of State for the Home Department for the helpful way in which she has assisted me—as have her civil servants, led by Mr. Alan Brown. He has done tremendous work in helping to inform me on several highly technical and difficult issues. That has ensured the smooth running of the measure through its stages in the House, and its improvement in Committee. Shortly, my Bill will leave the House and go to another place. I trust that their lordships will give it swift passage, so that a badly needed measure that commands great support is on the statute book by the end of July, comes into force by September and is in place for most of the next football season, when it can do something positive to minimise the sort of behaviour that has become all too familiar, both in this country and, especially, overseas.

1.50 pm

Mr. Ivor Caplin (Hove): I want to say only a few words and concur with the remarks of the hon. Member for West Chelmsford (Mr. Burns). I congratulate him on the way in which he piloted his Bill through Second Reading and in Committee. As a football fan, I am pleased that the Bill is now making speedy progress, as I hoped it would when I spoke on Second Reading. I shall focus my remarks on two clauses, 9 and 10, which deal with racist chanting and ticket touting, against both of which I have been campaigning for some time.

I am pleased that, today, we as a House have an opportunity to say once and for all that we oppose the racist chanting that has bedevilled football for many years. We should be aware of its intrusion into cricket and other sports, which might be an issue that my hon. Friend the Minister will wish to discuss with colleagues, including our hon. Friend the Minister for Sport.

On Second Reading, I said that ticket touting was not entrepreneurship, but robbery. I have no doubt that stronger regulations to stop ticket touting are welcome in this country. I hope that we shall be able to use that framework as the basis for discussions with our European partners about how to strengthen the framework for overseas football.

1.52 pm

Mr. Tony Clarke: I congratulate the hon. Member for West Chelmsford (Mr. Burns) on introducing his Bill, which highlights and tackles the loopholes that have enabled football hooligans to continue to flourish.

To a certain extent, the media have misrepresented the debate in such a way as to make us believe that we still have a problem in our domestic game. That is not true. In the main, football has cleaned up its own act, largely through the efforts of supporters working hard within their clubs. Now, we are addressing loopholes that enable hooligans to cause trouble abroad and to chant racist slogans at matches, and we are acting to rid ourselves of ticket touts.

In the other place and when the Bill returns to this House, I hope that two fundamental points that still cause me concern are addressed. The first relates to football-related offences and my hope that we will find a way to give some protection to third parties who get caught up in violent events. People go to bars for many reasons—for a stag night, for a night out with friends or as regulars—but if they get caught up in violence that is construed as being football related, they might fall foul of the restriction orders that we impose.

The second point relates to racist chanting. The Minister may be aware of concerns that I voiced in Committee, that although we have corrected one anomaly—that of a chorus being defined as at least two people before action could be taken; that has now been reduced to one person—we have not corrected the anomaly relating to repeated utterance. Although action might be possible under a breach of the peace, unless the offending comment is repeated, it might be difficult to obtain a conviction.

If ever a reason was needed for legislation of this nature being on the statute book, it was provided this week in *Four Four Two*, in an article about a self-confessed hooligan and Chelsea fan by the name of Martin King. The article states:

[Mr. Tony Clarke]

"On one occasion, King, whose passport was recognised by a copper when he was off to watch Chelsea in the Cup Winners' Cup, told an officer he no longer followed football and was going wine-tasting in France—by sheer coincidence on the same day the Blues were playing in Europe. 'Sorry to bother you lads,' replied the policeman, who handed King back his passport."

For that reason, we must not let this matter drop. I wish the legislation every success, in its present form or as a Government measure.

1.55 pm

Mrs. Laing: I wish briefly to commend my hon. Friend the Member for West Chelmsford (Mr. Burns) for introducing this excellent Bill, which, as has been shown this morning, enjoys wide support throughout the House. It will have far-reaching consequences, so it is right that we have considered the arguments in depth today. I also commend my right hon. Friends the Members for Bromley and Chislehurst (Mr. Forth) and for Penrith and The Border (Mr. Maclean) for their assiduous examination of the Bill. However, as I appreciate that brevity is necessary to ensure that the Bill does not run out of time, I am happy simply to commend it to the House and to leave the rest to the Minister.

1.56 pm

Mr. Forth: It always makes me nervous when I hear hon. Members say, "This Bill has wide support on all sides of the House." My memory goes back to the Child Support Agency, which similarly enjoyed the support of both sides of the House, and which subsequent Conservative and Labour Governments attempted to put right many years later. My right hon. and hon. Friends will recall many measures that were introduced in a rush of enthusiasm and received widespread support throughout the House, and which almost invariably turned out to be some of the worst pieces of legislation ever inflicted on the voters and taxpayers. I hope that this will not be one of them.

I have expressed my reservations about the Bill. I understand why my hon. Friend the Member for West Chelmsford (Mr. Burns) has introduced it and I accept that there is support for the measure. However, I add in parenthesis that the amount of support—visual, vocal and physical—has not been exactly overwhelming today. The House has its own peculiar reasons for working in this way and moving mysteriously its wonders to perform, so I shall leave that to one side.

I remain somewhat uneasy about the extent to which in this Bill, as in others, we are shifting the balance—slowly but inexorably—away from the traditional rights enjoyed by individuals in this country to benefit "the authorities", whoever they are, and who take many forms in this country, as in others. They have ever greater powers and resources, and technology is widely available to them. I am sure that, in most cases, that is a force for good and reassures the majority of law-abiding people. However, we must acknowledge that, every now and then, there is a distinct danger that those huge mechanisms and enormous powers will go wrong and be abused—usually inadvertently, but sometimes deliberately. Above all, our prime responsibility in the House of Commons is to seek to protect the individual.

I hope that we have discharged that responsibility in this case and I hope that the Bill's wider powers will not go wrong in any way. I hope that I am proved wrong, but I must express that reservation. I accept that my hon. Friend's Bill will proceed, having received due process and proper debate in the House and in Committee. It received a good debate on Report—which is the only way I believe legislation should be able to proceed. My hon. Friend came high in the ballot and he has handled the Bill impeccably. I congratulate him on carrying the House with him. It now remains to be seen to what extent the other place will examine the matter. I support Third Reading.

1.59 pm

Kate Hoey: I congratulate the hon. Member for West Chelmsford (Mr. Burns) on successfully getting his Bill through all its parliamentary stages. I am grateful for his co-operation during the Bill's drafting and its progress through the House, and for the skilful way in which he has approached that. I am grateful to other hon. Members for their informed, considered contributions to debates on these important measures, which aim to maintain and enhance the high quality of our national sport and the prominence that it enjoys. We must maintain that by looking after the interests of the decent, law-abiding supporter. The supporters' interests remain paramount, and I was pleased with the constructive contributions to the consultation process made by many of those who represent them.

As we all know, the introduction of the Bill will add to our sophisticated legislative process for dealing with football-related offences. We all recognise, however, that legislation is only part of the solution to that problem. As the hon. Member for West Chelmsford has said throughout the debate, the most important people who can help us, and whom the Bill is really about, are the decent supporters. They will benefit from the measures.

I do not want to go into recent international results on the pitch which have, sadly, not gone too well for the home countries, but we continue to hope that we shall have representation at the Euro 2000 championship in Belgium and Holland. We have already entered into discussions with our colleagues to work out the details of policing and security for that competition.

We want to ensure that all supporters travelling from this country are able to enjoy football in a safe, secure environment, as the vast, well-behaved majority do. They are just as sickened by the shameful antics of the tiny minority who, regrettably, tarnish the image of decent supporters as well as that of our country. That is why we shall continue to seek to introduce measures that prevent those who commit football-related offences from travelling abroad.

The Bill will help to promote the positive aspects of good behaviour. It sends out a strong message that there are firm measures to deal with those who view football as a battleground, not a playing field. We do not want those people associated with our game, and we should all work together to get rid of them. The Bill takes a good step towards that.

Question put and agreed to.

Bill accordingly read the Third time, and passed.

Adoption (Intercountry Aspects) Bill

As amended in the Standing Committee, considered.

Clause 14

RESTRICTION ON BRINGING CHILDREN INTO THE UNITED KINGDOM FOR ADOPTION

2.3 pm

Mr. David Maclean (Penrith and The Border): I beg to move amendment No. 9, in page 8, leave out lines 17 to 22.

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Mr. Michael J. Martin): With this, it will be convenient to discuss amendment No. 10, in page 8, line 20, leave out from 'knowledge' to end of line 22.

Mr. Maclean: The amendments are small but potentially important. Clause 14 is in the miscellaneous and supplemental part of the Bill and will insert into section 56 of the Adoption Act 1976 restrictions on people bringing children into the United Kingdom for adoption, contrary to any regulation that may be prescribed by the Secretary of State. The amendments do not deal with those regulations. Leaving aside whatever requirements the Secretary of State may prescribe in those regulations, it is important to have penalties for anyone who breaches the restrictions in clause 14.

My concern is with subsection (4), which says:

"Proceedings for an offence under this section may be brought within a period of six months from the date on which evidence sufficient in the opinion of the prosecutor to warrant the proceedings came to his knowledge; but no such proceedings shall be brought by virtue of this subsection more than three years after the commission of the offence."

The amendments in my name and that of my right hon. Friend the Member for Bromley and Chislehurst (Mr. Forth) would have one of two effects. Amendment No. 9 would delete the whole of subsection (4), and as an alternative, amendment No. 10 would delete the last part, which is the bar on prosecution more than three years after the commission of the offence.

It is worth while probing these matters to ascertain the views of the Minister and of the promoter, the hon. Member for Winchester (Mr. Oaten), on the reasons for the provision of three years. I appreciate that there cannot be an indefinite period. Clearly that would be an injustice. However, when the Minister was last in his place on a Friday we were debating putting people on the so-called black list in the context of the Protection of Children Bill. I cannot remember the time limits for backdating offences in that Bill or for saying that people could be put on the register even if their paedophiliac activity or their abuse of children happened many years ago. I think that the time scale in that Bill was much longer than three years.

Nevertheless, we are talking not about child abusers but those who have adopted a child, or who wish to do so, who have committed an offence by bringing somebody into the United Kingdom for adoption. They have done that not because they wish to abuse the child but possibly as a result of a misguided sense of loyalty or a misguided decision that they can help the child, or possibly for wrong and selfish reasons. They may not wish to comply with the law or may not comply with it, but they wish to breach the law to adopt a child illegally.

In those circumstances, we should be sending out a slightly stronger signal. A bar after three years perhaps sends too weak a signal. If an offence has gone undetected for three years, those concerned will know that they will get away with it. If we conclude that it is wrong in any event for people to commit such an act, we should not put a three-year bar on their being prosecuted for the offence.

I cannot remember what the usual bar on criminal prosecutions is. Is there a limit of seven years? The period is different for many different offences. However, three years seems to be a highly restrictive period within which to bring a prosecution once there is evidence that a crime has been committed.

Amendment No. 9 would remove the obligation on a prosecutor, on discovering that a crime has been committed, to act within six months of his feeling that there is sufficient evidence. That is slightly too restrictive. Do we need to have a time limit? I think that there is an obligation on the Crown Prosecution Service in any case to move as speedily as it can, and there may be good reasons for it taking slightly longer than six months to commence proceedings.

Inevitably, in circumstances involving the illegal adoption of children or of bringing children into this country to adopt them improperly, people will have behaved deviously. The facts will possibly be difficult to ascertain. The prosecutor might need more time to put together a case that will stick in court. I cannot see that there will be a fundamental injustice to the accused person, or the person who may be accused, if proceedings are not commenced within six months.

I agree, of course, that there should not be a ghastly sword of Damocles hanging over someone's head, where they are told that proceedings may be brought against them and it takes years and years before any prosecution is or is not brought. That is not appropriate. However, we either need a period that is longer than six months or we do not need a period to be prescribed; the matter can then be left to be dealt with under the normal rules and subject to the obligation that already applies to the CPS to bring prosecutions as speedily as it can provided that it has sufficient evidence.

We must examine carefully the bar after three years. In many cases evidence may come to light only when the child has started school. In some cases it may come to light only when the child has come of age, has applied for a national insurance number, or has a health problem and is taken to a doctor when aged five, seven, nine or whatever. In those circumstances the doctor or the health centre may discover that the child was adopted improperly four, five or six years before. The authorities should then have the right to prosecute. If this is regarded as something for which there should be a penalty, I suggest to the Bill's promoter that we should not have too short a cut-off period, as that would prevent the prosecution taking action against people who should be punished but who committed an offence five, six or seven years earlier.

Mrs. Virginia Bottomley (South-West Surrey): I appreciate the opportunity to contribute at this late stage to the debate on this important Bill, especially on amendments Nos. 8 and 9. As I served as chairman of the

[Mrs. Virginia Bottomley]

juvenile court for many years and then, in my capacity as a Minister, was involved in the early stages of consideration of this difficult issue, I am delighted that the Bill has reached a critical stage and looks as though it will pass successfully on to the statute book. Would that it had been a wider adoption Bill.

Undoubtedly, amendments Nos. 8 and 9 relate to the area that has caused most pain and suffering. They concern a vexed and sensitive question, because introducing criminal offences in child care matters is always a serious step. Too often, families felt provoked into abusing the rules and the system because of the resistance and insults that they received from local authorities and adoption agencies. I was greatly perplexed that, at a time when so much effort was going into creating new fertility treatments with in vitro fertilisation and other such steps, there was so much resistance and prejudice against intercountry adoption.

Of course it is a profoundly serious step for a child to leave its natural country and live in another land, but for those who saw the alternative—frequently, institutionalisation without health care, education, nurture or love—the opportunity to give a child a loving, caring home in this country proved irresistible. Too often, those families who tried to go through the proper channels found themselves rejected and resisted at every turn.

No one could condone taking a child from one country to another without using the proper processes, but I ask the Minister and the hon. Member for Winchester (Mr. Oaten)—the Bill's promoter—whether there will also be a countervailing power to take action against local authorities that simply refuse to co-operate with intercountry adoption. I accept that many have changed their tune. To hear the British Agencies for Adoption and Fostering—

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. I remind the right hon. Lady that we are considering a specific amendment, which is far narrower than the points that she is making at the moment.

Mrs. Bottomley: I stand corrected, Mr. Deputy Speaker, but I hope that the House will understand the relevance to the amendments of what I am saying. My right hon. Friend the Member for Penrith and The Border (Mr. Maclean) is discussing the issue of the six months and the three-year maximum. I believe that legislation should be passed only if it will be perceived as reasonable and will be acceptable to families and to those implementing it. The present unreasonable state of affairs has caused many people to feel affronted and provoked.

I hope that, if my right hon. Friend the Member for Penrith and The Border can achieve reassurances on several points, he will not feel the need to press his amendment to a vote, because it seems to me that, after three years, a child and a family should be free of the background threat that a prosecution might be lodged. I do not believe that a family can conceal a child for more than three years, and after three years, the child has become part of that family. If difficulties were emerging, almost certainly they would have come to the notice of health visitors, schools or social workers. Six months is necessary because, regrettably, it is possible to conceal a child for six months, and that child might well be at a particularly sensitive stage of development at which he or she needs the support of health visitors, teachers and other specialist providers.

2.15 pm

My right hon. Friend the Member for Penrith and The Border should not press this matter further, subject to reassurances from the Minister that the unreasonableness of the statutory agencies will be tackled and that there will be discretion over taking action against families. A criminal offence in such matters is extremely serious. The Campaign for Intercountry Adoption—which has members in my constituency—has made some important points about cases where it would be inappropriate to take a legalistic and persecutory approach. With a great deal of good will towards the Bill, I ask the Minister to offer some reassurance to help my right hon. Friend to withdraw his amendments.

Mr. Mark Oaten (Winchester): These important amendments hit at the heart of the Bill—the prevention of a practice that no hon. Member wants to see continue: the practice of bringing children into this country without reference to the proper procedures.

The current procedures in this country are far too weak to deal with the problem as it stands. Existing legislation would not allow any mechanisms for the authorities to tackle a couple who had brought a child into this country and had sought to keep the child hidden here for six months. If that couple were successful and the authorities found out about the child after seven months, the authorities would have no powers to tackle them. That is wrong, and nonsensical.

As the right hon. Member for South-West Surrey (Mrs. Bottomley) said, we can all imagine circumstances where a child could be hidden for six months. The critical point in the Bill—and the reason why I hope that the right hon. Friend the Member for Penrith and The Border (Mr. Maclean) will withdraw his amendments, which would take away the power—is that it would provide the ability to extend the six-month period to three years. That would mean that we would not need to discover the event within six months, but that the provisions would kick in at the point at which the offence was discovered. If, after a year and a half, the authorities discovered that a child had been brought in, they would have the power to take action. That is what we all wish to see.

I understand the concerns of the right hon. Member for Penrith and The Border about the three-year period, and his point that if individuals have broken the law, there should perhaps not be a limit at all. I thought that the right hon. Lady made the point very well that we can be satisfied that any problems or offences would have come to light in three years. Surely after three years it is reasonable that the family should be able to carry on without the threat of legal action. If abuse is discovered in the family after more than three years, other forms of law could kick in to tackle it. I hope that the right hon. Gentleman will withdraw his amendments.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health (Mr. John Hutton): The right hon. Member for South-West Surrey (Mrs. Bottomley) speaks with great knowledge and wisdom on child care matters, and she

raised a number of issues concerning the amendments. I assure her and the House that the Government will keep all aspects of adoption law and practice under active review. One of the purposes of the Bill is to create a new responsibility for local authorities to operate an intercountry adoption service. No one will be able to opt out of legislation passed by the House.

The points made by the right hon. Member for Penrith and The Border (Mr. Maclean) were dealt with effectively by the hon. Member for Winchester (Mr. Oaten). I remind the right hon. Gentleman that, under the Magistrates Courts (Procedure) Act 1998, there is a six-month bar on prosecutions for summary offences.

The Bill provides for a new summary offence, and to show the seriousness with which we will treat offences of bringing children into the United Kingdom outwith the regulations, we propose to extend to three years the period within which a prosecution can be made.

The amendments are directly contradictory: amendment No. 9 would require that proceedings could be brought only within six months of the offence being committed, which is the present situation, but amendment No. 10 would contradict that by providing that proceedings could be brought with no time limit at all. The right hon. Member for Penrith and The Border had better make up his mind.

Because of the current restrictions on bringing summary proceedings for these offences, no proceedings have ever been brought against a person for bringing in a child in breach of the adoption legislation. That situation is unacceptable and the Bill is designed to correct it.

Mr. Maclean: This has been a useful debate. I tabled the amendments as probing amendments and I am very conscious of the wisdom of what my right hon. Friend the Member for South–West Surrey (Mrs. Bottomley) and the Minister have said. I was in toughening-up mode this morning. We spent the whole morning trying to get draconian new provisions into the Football (Offences and Disorder) Bill and perhaps I was being a bit too severe in trying to remove the three-year limit in this Bill.

I accept that in prosecuting family cases we need to have a different yardstick and a more sensitive set of rules than in prosecuting football hooligans. Following the wise words of reassurance, I am happy to beg to ask leave to withdraw the amendment.

Amendment, by leave, withdrawn.

Order for Third Reading read.

2.21 pm

Mr. Oaten: I beg to move, That the Bill be now read the Third time.

The Bill has wide support from individuals and groups involved in adoption. I have been extremely encouraged by the cross-party support for the provisions throughout our proceedings, especially in the excellent Second Reading debate.

Many of us have been concerned about the recent increase in the number of couples who, in seeking to adopt children from a foreign country, have not had the best quality of service from local authorities—the Bill is designed to tackle some of those issues—but we would all be more concerned about those individuals who have gone down that route as a way of avoiding some of the controls that are in place for the adoption of children in the United Kingdom.

The Bill is an attempt for the first time to deal with the grey areas by proper regulation. The most pleasing provision is the adoption of the Hague convention, allowing the House finally to ratify it, having signed up to it in 1993. It is an embarrassment to this country that we have taken so long to ratify the convention, which will institute an agreement on the recognition of various standards. Given that it is based on the fundamental rights of the child, I hope that its ratification will mean that we have enshrined clearly the principle that the child's interests must be paramount in the way in which adoption takes place.

The Bill provides for ways in which we can stop the criminal activity of bringing children into this country by those couples who seek, by one means or another, to avoid going through the proper procedures. We have, rightly, good controls for adopting children within the United Kingdom, and it would be wrong to think that one can try to avoid those controls and get a second-hand or second-rate child from another country. That is why the Bill tightens the provisions on couples who may pay for private home study reports and bypass the social work system, as well as the provisions for individuals who bring children into the country.

The Bill also reminds local authorities of what is required of them and of how they should respond to those who go to them for advice and approval for adopting. I hope that the provisions will mean that the quality of local authorities' performance matches that of my local authority, Hampshire, which has become expert in managing the process, and that a culture will develop in which authorities take a positive attitude towards the whole question of intercountry adoption. We should also, because of changed and improved practice, see far fewer individuals trying to bypass the law and bring in children, late at night, in the boot of a car.

I believe that the Bill is both tough and tender, not only recognising intercountry adoption and trying to improve performance, but saying to those who want to hinder that performance that the strong hand of the law will stop them. Ultimately, the child's individual rights are more important than are those of people trying to adopt, for whatever reason. I hope that the House will pass the Bill, which I warmly endorse.

2.25 pm

Mr. Hutton: As the hon. Member for Winchester (Mr. Oaten) said, the Bill aims to achieve two important objectives. The first is to introduce measures that protect children living abroad and who are to be adopted by people resident in the United Kingdom. The main instrument of achieving that objective is ratification of the 1993 Hague convention on intercountry adoption. Enactment of the Bill will enable the convention's articles to be subsumed within our own substantive law, and thereby to enhance the quality and effectiveness of adoption law.

The second important objective is to place intercountry adoption within a clear statutory framework, thereby enabling regulations to be made to ensure that, within these islands, only those who are approved as suitable to become adoptive parents by a local authority or adoption

[Mr. Hutton]

agency are able to proceed to complete the adoption process abroad. As the hon. Member for Winchester said, the Bill's provisions to introduce new offences are absolutely necessary if we are to protect the welfare of children, by preventing them being brought to the United Kingdom for the purposes of adoption without authority.

The Bill also reaffirms the Government's view that privately commissioned home study reports for the purposes of adoption—whether prepared in connection with the convention or not—are unacceptable. In future, only a local authority or approved adoption agency will be able to provide a home study assessment.

The Bill also provides, for the first time, that intercountry adoption is put on a sound legal footing. I believe that that should make the procedures for convention adoptions, and the majority of other intercountry adoptions, more straightforward and effective and less bureaucratic. I should like to emphasise, however, that the last thing intended in the Bill's preparation was that it should place obstacles in the path of those who wish to adopt from abroad. That is not our intention.

The Government support the Bill not only for its important measures, but because it will provide the facility by which people may be assessed and their application processed within a clearly understood and workable framework. I believe that the Bill will achieve all of that. I also believe that, ultimately, the provisions will enable us to deliver a better and more effective service to intercountry adopters.

I very warmly congratulate the hon. Member for Winchester on promoting his Bill. He has done the House a great service in giving us the opportunity to improve our regulations and law on the matter. I hope, as he does, that the House will now give the Bill a Third Reading.

2.27 pm

Mr. Nick St. Aubyn (Guildford): I think that it was evident on Second Reading that the Bill has the support of the whole House. Today, we all wish it on its way with good speed.

Unfortunately, one or two comments that I made on Second Reading provoked a little confusion, particularly among Labour Members. It really does need to be made clear that—as the Minister has just said—the responsibility placed on local authorities by the Bill is very great. If the rights of the child are to be fully recognised, we must also develop an international standard by which the quality of those wishing to adopt is judged.

I believe that such an international standard would also enlighten those of us in the United Kingdom. The policy of too many local authorities—on matters such as age and interracial adoption, for example—is too restrictive, because they are spoilt for choice. When it comes to international and intercountry adoption, a child who is refused a home in the United Kingdom may be subject to much looser rules in another country. I therefore believe that we must address the issue as soon as possible, preferably as part of a much more comprehensive adoption Bill.

Question put and agreed to.

Bill accordingly read the Third time, and passed.

Fur Farming (Prohibition) Bill

As amended in the Standing Committee, further considered.

Clause 3

EFFECT OF FORFEITURE ORDERS.

Amendment proposed [14 May]: No. 36, in page 2, line 20, at the end to insert the words—

'(c) in Northern Ireland, to the Crown Court'.—(*Mr. Forth*).

2.29 pm

Question again proposed, That the amendment be made.

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Mr. Michael J. Martin): I remind the House that with this we are discussing the following amendments: No. 37, in clause 5, page 3, line 42, at end insert—

'(c) in the case of businesses or parts of businesses carried on solely or primarily in Northern Ireland, the Lands Tribunal for Northern Ireland.'.

No. 38, in clause 6, page 4, line 6, at end insert—

'(d) in relation to Northern Ireland, the Secretary of State'.

No. 35, in clause 7, page 4, line 13, leave out subsection (5).

The right hon. Member for Penrith and The Border (Mr. Maclean) had the Floor on 14 May.

Mr. David Maclean (Penrith and The Border): I was concerned about non-application of the Bill's provisions to Northern Ireland, as the Bill applies them to northern Scotland—I mean to all of Scotland. If they applied only to northern Scotland, my relatives would not be so worried about them. I was trying to develop the argument that there is an inconsistency in this part of the Bill, as Scotland now has its own Parliament.

It being half-past Two o'clock, the debate stood adjourned.

Debate to be resumed on Friday 23 July.

Remaining Private Members' Bills

REFERENDUMS BILL

Order read for resuming adjourned debate on new clause proposed [21 May] on consideration of Bill, as amended in the Standing Committee.

Hon. Members: Object.

Debate further adjourned till Friday 23 July.

NUCLEAR SAFEGUARDS BILL

Order for Second Reading read.

Hon. Members: Object.

Second Reading deferred till Friday 23 July.

PRESCRIPTION CHARGES (HORMONE REPLACEMENT THERAPY) BILL

Order for Second Reading read.

Hon. Members: Object.

Second Reading deferred till Friday 23 July.

RESTRAINING AND PROTECTION ORDERS BILL

Order for Second Reading read.

Hon. Members: Object.

Second Reading deferred till Friday 23 July.

COUNTRY LANES AND VILLAGES BILL

Order for Second Reading read.

Hon. Members: Object.

Second Reading deferred till Friday 23 July.

BIRTHS AND DEATHS REGISTRATION (AMENDMENT) BILL [*LORDS*]

Order for Second Reading read.

Hon. Members: Object.

Second Reading deferred till Friday 23 July.

ENERGY CONSERVATION (HOUSING) BILL

Order read for resuming adjourned debate on Second Reading [30 April].

Hon. Members: Object.

Debate further adjourned till Friday 23 July.

ENERGY EFFICIENCY BILL

Order read for resuming adjourned debate on Second Reading [12 March].

Hon. Members: Object.

Debate further adjourned till Friday 23 July.

PENSIONS (AMENDMENT) BILL

Order for Second Reading read.

Hon. Members: Object.

Second Reading deferred till Friday 23 July.

WILDLIFE AND COUNTRYSIDE (AMENDMENT) BILL

Order for Second Reading read.

Hon. Members: Object.

Second Reading deferred till Friday 23 July.

REGULATIONS ON SMALL BUSINESSES (REDUCTION) BILL

Order for Second Reading read.

Hon. Members: Object.

Second Reading deferred till Friday 23 July.

HARE COURSING BILL

Order for Second Reading read.

Hon. Members: Object.

Second Reading deferred till Friday 23 July.

LICENSING (YOUNG PERSONS) BILL

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Not moved.

AGE LIMITS ON HEALTH CARE BILL

Order for Second Reading read.

Hon. Members: Object.

Second Reading deferred till Friday 23 July.

HEALTH CARE AND ENERGY EFFICIENCY BILL

Order read for resuming adjourned debate on Second Reading [23 April].

Hon. Members: Object.

Debate further adjourned till Friday 23 July.

ACCESS TO ENVIRONMENTAL INFORMATION BILL

Order for Second Reading read.

Hon. Members: Object.

Second Reading deferred till Friday 23 July.

PLANNING APPEALS BILL

Order for Second Reading read.

Hon. Members: Object.

Second Reading deferred till Friday 23 July.

BUS FUEL DUTY (EXEMPTIONS) BILL

Order read for resuming adjourned debate on Second Reading [12 March].

Hon. Members: Object.

Debate further adjourned till Friday 23 July.

PUBLIC HOUSE NAMES BILL

Order for Second Reading read.

Hon. Members: Object.

Second Reading deferred till Friday 23 July.

EUROPEAN PARLIAMENTARY ELECTIONS (GIBRALTAR) BILL [*LORDS*]

Order for Second Reading read.

Hon. Members: Object.

Second Reading deferred till Friday 23 July.

ROAD TRAFFIC REGULATION (CYCLE PARKING) BILL [*LORDS*]

Order for Second Reading read.

Hon. Members: Object.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Objection taken. Debate to be resumed on which day?

Mr. Stephen Pound (Ealing, North): If we are not too busy, Friday 23 July suggests itself.

Second Reading deferred till Friday 23 July.

WAITING TIMES (NATIONAL HEALTH SERVICE) BILL

Order for Second Reading read.

Hon. Members: Object.

Second Reading deferred till Friday 23 July.

STREETWORKS BILL

Order for Second Reading read.

Hon. Members: Object.

Second Reading deferred till Friday 23 July.

ROYAL PARKS (TRADING) BILL

Order for Second Reading read.

Hon. Members: Object.

Second Reading deferred till Friday 23 July.

Planning (Use Classes)

Motion made, and Question proposed, That this House do now adjourn.—*[Mr. Hill.]*

2.35 pm

Mr. Stephen Pound (Ealing, North): I am delighted to reach that part of the day's business normally described as the graveyard slot.

The vexed issue of planning and funeral parlours is of great concern to my constituents. For many years, one of my constituents lived next to an excellent local newsagent and tobacconist shop, where sustenance for mind and body was available through a wide display of specialist magazines and tobaccos from many continents. To her horror, one day she found that a funeral parlour had appeared almost overnight in the small parade of shops.

My constituent came from Northolt, and immediately contacted the council and demanded to know what it was going to do. The response from Peter Causer and Janet Thomas in the planning department was that nothing could be done, because of the Town and Country Planning (Use Classes) Order 1987. Extraordinarily and bizarrely, that order places newsagents and many other retail outlets in the same use category as funeral parlours.

I have no objection to funeral parlours and funeral directors operating in the high street. They provide an essential service with considerable sensitivity, which is greatly appreciated, and they are extremely supportive of the local community. I do not consider their presence in the high street in any way inappropriate. By and large, they make good neighbours—there are few complaints about loud music, for example.

However, Mike Churchman, speaking for one of the larger groups of funeral directors in the country, has drawn attention to the fact that many people object to funeral directors operating in the high street. In many ways, that stems from English people's fear of death. We still believe that it will never happen to us, and that death is an awesome and frightening thing. I do not subscribe to that view. I have been told that there will be great rejoicing when news of my death sweeps west London. Death is not something to be especially sad about.

The relevant planning regulations appear ludicrous. Elsewhere in my constituency, a funeral director's establishment is located between a barber and a balti shop. That may seem appropriate to some, who perhaps believe that all tastes are catered for in that parade of shops, but there is something about it that does not seem right.

The deeper I looked into the 1987 order, the more I realised that the Government have failed people in the past because the use classes are so ill drawn. I had intended to confine myself to funeral directors and funeral parlours, but I have found it impossible to resist the temptation to wander slightly further afield—although remaining within the ambit of the use classes order.

The old pie and mash shop next to the Methodist church in Greenford closed down and was reopened, on the following Monday, as Crikey O'Reilly's Irish pub. I take second place to no one in the respect in which I hold Greenford's teetotal Methodist community, and the placement of the pub was completely inappropriate.

Fortunately, after several discussions with a small focus group at the pub, it was agreed that the name would be changed to the Belmullet Tavern, in honour of one of the most delightful parts of County Mayo. I have been honoured to visit that tavern on many occasions since. However, the difficulty is that the A3 use categories permit a food retail outlet—in this case the pie and mash shop—to be changed into a pub.

It gets worse. The categories are so badly drawn that the old unrestricted A3 uses have led to an over-concentration of pubs and, even more sinisterly, such things as super-pubs. I believe that the Minister is familiar with the concept of super-pubs and will discuss them later. Planning fails in these cases and it is left to licensing magistrates to resolve the difficulties, which is impossible.

The distinction between the A3 use class, which covers super-pubs, and the D2 class, which covers dancehalls and nightclubs, is extremely blurred. It is ludicrous that a cinema can be converted into a late-night dancehall without permission. The primary use of a building can vary depending on the time of day, and enforcement is extremely difficult if sui generis use is not proven.

The A1 use category—traditionally known as the coffee bar and sandwich bar category—and the A3 use category have a blurred distinction. In modern, fashionable outlets of a type completely unknown to me, but which those who live in more fashionable parts of London tell me are called Pret a Manger—does it mean ready to eat?—seating is a dominant feature. In many cases, on appeal, inspectors have used an extremely broad definition of primary use and allowed considerable change so that A1 units have become A3 units by default. We clearly need a separate classification.

As I delved deeper into planning law, I found out about business use classes B1, B2 and B8, and the situation is even worse. Permitted development rights to change units of 235 sq m to B8 use are being exercised in conjunction with amalgamation, which is causing extraordinary problems for local amenities and roads and the character of areas. The difficulties are significant, but nothing can be done.

Finally, the position of museums, art galleries and libraries is worse still. I freely admit that Northolt is not over-blessed with those. In fact, to be perfectly honest, there is none. I have a large collection of old Fulham football club programmes that could form the basis of a library, and we have a lot of graffiti that could start off an art collection, but, within the D1 non-residential institution category, any museum, art gallery or public library—some hon. Members may have such things in their constituencies—could turn into a place of worship, a nursery or, worst of all, a private school. I wonder how any of my hon. Friends would like it if their cherished local art gallery suddenly became a private school or a place of worship without any need for public consultation or planning approval.

There is a dichotomy in the regulations. In 1987, the Bromley and Chislehurst tendency ruled the roost, and the Government supported the idea that there should be no restrictions on business men and business women—probably just men in those days—so that they could ride rampant and roughshod. The idea was that life should be made easier for business people: if they were allowed to do what they liked, a thousand flowers would bloom. We have moved on since the days of that absurd, libertarian, laissez faire philosophy, recognising that regulations and restrictions in planning law provide sensible guidelines and parameters, and should involve public consultation and participation.

[Mr. Stephen Pound]

What most upset my constituent in Northolt was not the funeral parlour in the high street—she did not object to that, and nor would most sensible people—but the fact that the local authority planning department was not involved in any way and that there was no public consultation. The normal process of democratic accountability simply did not work. Her experience tells me that the categories are clearly wrongly drawn.

I understand that there may possibly still be an instinct within the House to go against regulation—we have a Select Committee on Deregulation and, by and large, deregulation is a good thing. However, we must recognise that the amendments in 1987 to the Town and Country Planning (Amendment) Act 1972 drew the lines too widely and have created too many problems. Like all Londoners, I look to my hon. Friend the Minister for London and Construction to resolve that and many other problems in his response.

Many hon. Members come to the House with great and noble ambitions. Many come through these doors determined to bring world peace and amity by the end of their first term. Many of us seek to increase the sum total of human happiness by our activities. I am a modest man—many of my friends say that I have much to be modest about—and I do not immediately seek world peace and the happiness of all. I want a reclassification of the Town and Country Planning (Use Classes) Order 1987. Is that too much to ask?

Would it not be possible for the Minister to say—graciously, as ever—that among many other things it is the task of the Government to correct some of the wilder anomalies fuelled by the free market dogma of the previous Administration and to recognise that an important principle is involved? Planning officers are trying to do a job and to consult and work with the local community, but they are being prevented from doing so by the ways in which the use classes are drawn. The consequences for the local community, not merely in terms of democratic accountability, but of the changing nature of an area, are profound and, in many cases, to be regretted.

I suppose that I should, but I make no apologies for taking the time of the House on this matter, which may seem of specialised interest to most people. It affects us all. I offer that to the House and I finish in earnest anticipation of the response of my hon. Friend the Minister.

2.47 pm

The Minister for London and Construction (Mr. Nick Raynsford): First, I must congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Ealing, North (Mr. Pound) on securing this debate and giving us a subject that is of grave importance to his constituents and others who are concerned about the planning system.

I am also grateful to my hon. Friend for writing to me in advance with further details of his concerns, which as he said, wandered slightly wide of the designation, "Planning regulations for funeral parlours".

Referring to one of the more memorable comments by the former Prime Minister, Lord Attlee, my hon. Friend described himself as a modest man. I am not sure that my hon. Friend should be so modest. He has made a most significant contribution to the House in the two years or so in which he has been here, and he has certainly enhanced the sum of human happiness and amusement in this Chamber. I hope that in my response I will be able not merely to answer his questions, but to respond to some extent in kind.

I noted the example with which he opened his speech. Some people who take an interest in health matters might well consider that the change of use from a tobacconist to a funeral parlour was a related use. I leave that thought with my hon. Friend.

I disagree that there will be any cause for rejoicing in his constituency at the death of the Pound—a situation that none of us look forward to. I congratulate him in his success in securing the change of name from Crikey O'Reilly's to the Belmullet Tavern and I will not ask how long it took his focus groups to secure that happy outcome.

Finally, before I come to the serious side of the debate, I suggest that the flexibility to allow a change of use from a museum or art gallery to a place of worship or a school, about which my hon. Friend expressed concern, might be to the benefit of Ealing, North because it can work in the opposite direction. The change of use to a museum or art gallery might be easier without the requirement for specific planning consent. The creation of the hon. Gentleman's museum of Fulham football club memorabilia might therefore be easier to achieve.

It may helpful if I set out the legislative and policy background. The Town and Country Planning (Use Classes) Order 1987, which I will refer to as the UCO, sets out classes of land use. Changes within each of those classes do not require planning permission. In addition, the town and country planning general permitted development order grants a general permission for specified changes of use between some of these classes.

Both the UCO and the permitted development order are well-established measures in the town and country planning system. The UCO was introduced on the ground that the changes of use that it permits will have a broadly similar impact, for instance, in terms of noise, traffic and visual appearance. The intention is to strike an appropriate balance between the need to facilitate development and to protect local amenity and the environment.

The UCO plays an essential role in delivering a positive, proactive planning system that helps business and local communities to thrive. It removes from businesses and others the requirement to seek planning permission from the local planning authority for uses that are generally uncontroversial and do not adversely impact on local amenity. The UCO is kept under review so that problem areas can be addressed or particular matters clarified. Since 1987 only five amendments have been felt to be necessary.

I shall now move on to the first specific area of the UCO about which my hon. Friend commented—funeral businesses. Funeral directors' premises are included in the A1 shops class of the order, so a change to use by an undertaker from a shop does not require planning permission. That is on the basis that they have similar land use implications and provide a service to visiting members of the public. However, any works arising from the change of use may require a planning application to be submitted to the local planning authority.

Following a review of the UCO in 1991, the previous Government decided that funeral directors' premises should remain in the shops class. They felt that when people have to cope with bereavement, they should expect to be able to contact an undertaker in the locality. I agree with this view, and I think my hon. Friend does because he spoke warmly of the quality of service provided by funeral directors in meeting genuine needs. If such businesses had to be located well away from other shops and people's homes, it would only add unnecessary inconvenience to the distress of the bereaved.

We know that some would like funeral uses to be removed from the shops class of the UCO. Difficulties have, on occasion, arisen when shops in residential areas have changed to that use. Clearly, the siting of such businesses close to neighbouring developments such as old people's homes can be a delicate matter and may cause disquiet. However, those are isolated instances and we have no evidence that there is a widespread problem that would justify removal of funeral directors' rights under the UCO.

As my hon. Friend rightly acknowledged, funeral businesses traditionally conduct themselves with discretion and sensitivity appropriate to the nature of their work. They adhere to their trade associations' code of conduct, which sets standards to address the more delicate aspects of their work. Funeral directors are well aware of the need to minimise as far as possible the distressing connotations of the service. Funeral businesses are generally perceived in their communities as an uncontroversial and, indeed, valued presence in residential and shopping areas.

While funeral directors' premises fall within the UCO, funeral directors' chapels of rest are generally treated separately. If I may lapse into Latin, the technical term is sui generis, that is, outside the use class system. Mortuaries would also be sui generis unless ancillary to some other use of land, such as a hospital or clinic. That is because such activities are more likely to have an impact on local amenity and generate concern. Sui generis uses require specific planning permission for any changes to or from that use. A planning application would, therefore, be required for a new chapel of rest or a mortuary. That gives the local planning authority the opportunity to assess the impact of the proposed change of use on amenity and on the environment, and to consider any representations from interested parties. Local authority environmental health officers also have responsibility for ensuring that the required public health and safety standards are in place in chapels of rest. In addition, Government guidance sets out recommended standards of siting and design for public mortuaries.

In cases where a chapel of rest forms part of a funeral directors' premises and is ancillary to it, it is for the local planning authority to determine, on the particular facts of each case, whether the premises as a whole should fall within the shops class. That is very much a matter of fact and degree. Ultimately, of course, interpretation of the law is for the courts.

Where a planning application is necessary, local authorities are required to determine the application in accordance with the development plan for the area unless material considerations indicate otherwise. Development plans must take account of central Government policies. Those policies may also be material to decisions on individual planning applications. The Government have not issued specific planning guidance relating to funeral directors uses. However, planning policy guidance note 6, on town centres and retail developments—PPG6—promotes A1 shop use in existing centres where they are easily reached by public transport and conveniently located for those without a car. PPG6 also promotes the retention of facilities in local centres and neighbourhood shops. The aim of the Government's planning policy is to contribute to the regeneration of existing town centres and high streets.

Sustaining town centres depends on flexibility in the use of floor space. It is widely recognised that vacant properties can blight town and district centres. The presence of outlets that provide essential services, such as funeral parlours, may, therefore, actually have the effect of protecting, and enhancing the prospects of, other businesses.

My hon. Friend also referred to changes of use within the A3 class. That class comprises uses for the sale of food and drink, and of hot food for consumption on the premises. Class A3 uses may include restaurants, cafes, wine bars, public houses and takeaway establishments. The class was introduced to reflect the loosening of the traditional boundaries between the different types of catering establishment. When my hon. Friend referred to Pret a Manger, in a sense he made my case by pointing out the difficulty of distinguishing between those premises where people may eat on the premises and those where they may take food away for consumption elsewhere. Those boundaries are increasingly blurred in the patterns of retailing that are becoming more familiar to us. The aim of the use class order is to enable the trade to adapt to changing trends and demands without making businesses operate in an unduly rigid framework.

In general, the freedom to change use within the food and drink class has caused little difficulty. However, we have received a number of representations, including comments from the London Planning Advisory Committee and the Local Government Association. Their anxiety is that some changes of use within the class—for example, the change to use to a themed pub or super-pub, to which my hon. Friend referred, or from a pub to a drive-through takeaway—can lead to new, or more, intensive activity and give rise to concerns about such issues as parking, noise and public order.

As my hon. Friend acknowledged, there are extensive controls outside the planning system that local authorities can use to remedy problems such as those. For example, local authorities have wide-ranging powers to prevent or abate noise under part III of the Environmental Protection Act 1990. In addition, under sections 93 and 94 of that Act, local authorities can issue a street litter control notice, which requires the occupier to take steps to keep the area free of litter. That may involve sweeping, or providing and servicing litter bins. Failure to comply with the order could result in action through the magistrates court.

Under the Licensing Act 1964, it is open to magistrates to revoke, or to refuse to renew, licences for public houses and to impose certain other remedies where local residents are suffering unreasonable noise and nuisance. My hon. Friend will be aware that the Home Office is currently undertaking a review of liquor licensing laws. Those controls are all part of the wider picture. Having said that, I know that there are concerns about the existing planning controls and I can assure my hon. Friend that we are

[Mr. Nick Raynsford]

giving them very careful consideration. I hope that he will accept those assurances in the spirit in which he opened the debate.

My hon. Friend is concerned about the change from light industrial to office use permitted by the B1 class. The 1987 UCO amalgamated those formerly separate classes. The change was, in part, prompted by the changing relationship between industrial and office uses, especially in the field of high technology, and because those uses appeared to have no significantly different environmental impact. The changes were designed to afford more flexibility in the use of premises and thus to foster enterprise in local communities.

My hon. Friend is concerned that the freedom to change to office use might have had an adverse impact, and other hon. Members have made representations on the grounds that it might lead to a fall in light industrial premises and a decline in business diversity. In the past few years, we have received few representations about the issue, other than from the City of Westminster in respect of specific local problems. As with the issues relating to the A3 class, we are considering the points that have been made.

The recent White Paper, "The Future of Transport" contained a commitment to look for ways of improving the planning system's delivery of an integrated transport strategy, including a review of the UCO and relevant aspects of the permitted development order. Our intention is to examine the changes of use allowed under the UCO and part 3 of schedule 2 to the permitted development order to establish what transport implications they may have, in terms of traffic generation and car parking. That work might involve considering some of the use classes mentioned in today's debate.

In conclusion, the Government are well aware that there are aspects of the UCO that have caused concern in some locations and in some particular cases. However, we would need evidence of more widespread and significant problems to justify amending the UCO, which currently affords valuable freedoms and flexibilities that enable businesses to respond appropriately to changing economic and market circumstances and trends. We shall continue to monitor closely the operation of the order.

I am grateful to my hon. Friend for bringing these issues to my attention today. I assure him that the debate will contribute significantly to the Government's continuing interest in those matters, and to the monitoring of the performance of the use class order and the general permitted development rights.

Question put and agreed to.

Adjourned accordingly at two minutes past Three o'clock.

Written Answers to Questions

Monday 24 May 1999

DEFENCE

Territorial Army

Mr. Menzies Campbell: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what was *(a)* the ceiling on personnel numbers and *(b)* the actual strength of the Territorial Army in each month between May 1998 and May 1999; and if he will make a statement. [83629]

Mr. Doug Henderson *[holding answer 12 May 1999]:* The following is the information.

TA strengths by month May 1998 to April 1999

Month	*Total*
May 1998	55,735
June 1998	55,612
July 1998	55,070
August 1998	54,737
September 1998	54,145
October 1998	53,847
November 1998	54,430
December 1998	54,031
January 1999	53,466
February 1999	52,312
March 1999	51,456
April 1999	50,438

Note:
Figures do not include Non Regular Permanent Staff (NRPS)

The establishment of the Territorial Army between 1 May 1998 and 1 May 1999 was 69,000. There is no ceiling on TA personnel. The drawdown in numbers evident from the start of 1999 reflects the gradual drawdown to the post SDR establishment of 41,204. It is our intention to recruit to the full establishment.

RAF Aircraft (Sales)

Mr. Hancock: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence how many surplus RAF aircraft have been sold in each of the last five years; and to whom they were sold. [84567]

Mr. Spellar: The numbers of surplus RAF aircraft including helicopters sold in each of the last five years by the MOD's Disposal Sales Agency were as follows:

Year	
1994	154
1995	54
1996	34
1997	61
1998	45

A small number of these aircraft were sold to the armed forces of India, Oman, Uruguay and Sri Lanka. The majority, however, went to over 130 UK and overseas commercial enterprises and individuals. To identify each of these, and to seek their agreement to being named, would incur disproportionate cost.

Falklands Garrison

Mr. Gordon Prentice: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence, pursuant to his answer of 10 May 1999, *Official Report*, column *19*, on the Falklands garrison, what is the strategic reason for maintaining a garrison in the Falklands; and if he will make a statement. [84899]

Mr. Doug Henderson: Our garrison on the Falkland Islands is a demonstration of the Government's commitment to ensure the security of the Falkland Islands and to uphold the right of the Islanders to determine their own future. We will continue to provide a garrison comprising air, and land sea assets, backed up by the capability to reinforce if necessary.

Eurofighter

Mr. Hancock: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence when the first full squadron of Eurofighter aircraft will be in service with the RAF; and what was the original date expected. [82522]

Mr. George Robertson: I am withholding this information in accordance with Exemption 1 of the Code of Practice on Access to Government Information relating to Defence, Security and International Relations.

HOUSE OF COMMONS

Members' Salaries

Mr. Ashton: To ask the President of the Council if she will list the increases in Members' salaries and office expenses from 1971 to 1999. [84123]

Mrs. Beckett: The information requested is as follows:

Parliamentary Salary (£)	*Effective date*
3,250	16 October 1964
4,500	1 January 1972
5,750	13 June 1975
6,062	13 June 1976
6,270	13 June 1977
6,897	13 June 1978
9,450	13 June 1979
11,750	13 June 1980
13,950	13 June 1981
14,510	13 June 1982
15,308	13 June 1983
16,016	1 January 1984
16,904	1 January 1985
17,702	1 January 1986
18,500	1 January 1987
22,548	1 January 1988
24,107	1 January 1989
26,701	1 January 1990
28,970	1 January 1991
30,854	1 January 1992
30,854	1 January 1993
31,687	1 January 1994
33,189	1 January 1995
34,085	January 1996

Parliamentary Salary (£)	Effective date
43,000	1 July 1996
43,860	1 April 1997
45,066	1 April 1998
47,008	1 April 1999

Note:
Until 1 July 1996, Ministers in the House of Commons received an abated amount of the parliamentary salary.

Allowance for office expenses (£)	Effective date
500	1 October 1969
1,000	1 January 1972
1,750	1 April 1974
3,200	1 April 1975
3,512	13 June 1976
3,687	13 June 1977
4,200	13 June 1978
4,600	13 June 1979
6,750	14 February 1980
8,000	13 June 1980
8,480	13 June 1981
8,820	13 June 1982
12,000	13 June 1983
12,437	13 June 1984
13,211	1 April 1985
20,140	1 April 1986
21,302	1 April 1987
22,588	1 April 1988
24,903	1 April 1989
27,166	1 April 1990
28,986	1 April 1991
39,960	1 April 1992
40,380	1 April 1993
41,309	1 April 1994
42,754	1 April 1995
46,364	1 April 1996
47,569	1 April 1997
49,232	1 April 1998
50,264	1 April 1999

Note:
From 1 April 1980 an additional allowance of up to 10 per cent. of the sums shown has been available to provide pensions contributions for Members' employees.

WALES

Organic Farming

Mr. Caton: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales what plans he has to introduce measures to encourage farmers to shift to organic production methods. [84562]

Mr. Jon Owen Jones: The Organic Aid Scheme provides direct financial support for conversion to organic production. Subject to the approval of the European Commission, the payments rates available under this scheme will be increased to the following:

£s per hectare

	(a) Arable Area Payment Scheme eligible land	(b) Improved grassland	(c) Unimproved grassland/rough grazing
Year 1	225	175	25
Year 2	135	105	10
Year 3	50	40	5
Year 4	20	15	5
Year 5	20	15	5
Total	450	350	50

The Welsh Organic Food Sector Action Plan, launched in March, sets out an agenda for developing the organic sector in Wales, with the aim of encouraging an expansion of organic farming to 10 per cent. of Welsh agricultural produce.

The Organic Conversion Information Service will continue to provide free advice to prospective organic farmers.

In future, following the transfer of powers, these issues will be a matter for the National Assembly.

Health Service

Mr. Wigley: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales what estimate he has made, for each of the new NHS trust areas in Wales, of the number of posts which have been terminated in executive and directorate structures as a direct result of the recent reorganisation of the health service in Wales; and if he will make a statement. [84727]

Mr. Jon Owen Jones: Across the new NHS trusts in Wales the number of senior managerial posts has so far been reduced by a total of 80, as follows:

NHS Trusts	Senior managerial posts
Gwent Healthcare NHS Trust	12
Pontypridd and Rhondda NHS Trust	9
University Hospital of Wales and Llandough Hospital NHS Trust	5
Cardiff and District Community NHS Trust	4
Swansea NHS Trust	15
Bro Morgannwg NHS Trust	12
Carmarthenshire NHS Trust	5
North West Wales NHS Trust	4
Conwy and Denbighshire NHS Trust	5
North East Wales NHS Trust	9

Further reductions in managerial and administrative posts are expected to take place throughout the year.

Following the transfer of functions, this issue will be a matter for the National Assembly.

ENVIRONMENT, TRANSPORT AND THE REGIONS

Genetically Modified Crops

Mr. Baker: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what assessment he has made of the adequacy of the present regulations applying to genetically modified trial crops in respect of the need to prevent cross-contamination. [74864]

Mr. Meacher *[holding answer 5 March 1999]:* The risk of cross pollination is assessed for each case as part of the approvals process and consent would not be granted if cross pollination would cause harm to human health or the environment.

Genetically Modified Organisms

Mr. Matthew Taylor: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions, pursuant to his answer of 24 March 1999, *Official Report*, column *240*, on genetically modified organisms, what was

the name and position of the representative of the US State Department who made the representation to his Department. [80835]

Mr. Meacher: The US representative was Mr. Frank Loy, Under Secretary for Global Affairs at the State Department.

Advisory Committee on Releases into the Environment

Mr. Yeo: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what criteria he will employ in appointing new members of the Advisory Committee on Releases into the Environment. [81387]

Mr. Meacher *[holding answer 19 April 1999]:* I refer the hon. Member to the answer given to my hon. Friend, the Member for Wellingborough (Mr. Stinchcombe) on 11 May 1999, *Official Report,* columns *106–07.*

Jubilee Line

Mr. Ottaway: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will set out the outturn, estimated outturn or planned level of core investment excluding the Jubilee line extension in London Transport for the years 1993–94 to 1999–2000, in 1999 prices. [82419]

Ms Glenda Jackson: The requested information is in the table.

Constant 1998–99 prices in £ million

	LUL	*PFI*[1]	*LTB and other LT Businesses*[2]	*Total core business investment excluding JLE*[3]
1993–94[4]	556	0	38	594
1994–95[4]	563	0	28	591
1995–96	522	122	31	675
1996–97	395	145	24	564
1997–98	334	165	37	536
1998–99[5]	415	53	35	503
1999–2000[6]	335	161	29	525

[1] The PFI figures are not estimates of what the private sector is investing in London Transport. Rather they are London Transport's estimates of what investment in PFI projects would have cost had LT undertaken the investment themselves.
[2] LTB and other LT Businesses include LT Buses, LT Property, Victoria Coach Station, PASS, LT Museum and Group Services.
[3] Also excluding other smaller ring fenced activities including Croydon Tramlink, Dial-a-Ride, Crossrail, LUL works at Kings Cross for the Channel Tunnel Rail Link and London River Services pier purchase and construction.
[4] 1993–94 and 1994–95 include expenditure by London Buses Limited subsidiaries, which have since been sold to the private sector.
[5] Estimate
[6] Planned

Conventional Plant Breeding

Mr. Baker: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions (1) what assessment he has made of the environmental impact of herbicide-resistant oil seed rape varieties created by conventional plant breeding methods; what controls exist on such plants; and if he will make a statement; [82071]

(2) what recent assessment he has made of the adequacy of the regulatory systems for crops created by conventional plant breeding in respect of their potential environmental impact. [82072]

Mr. Meacher *[holding answer 27 April 1999]:* No formal assessment has been made of the environmental impact of herbicide-resistant oil seed rape varieties created by conventional plant breeding methods or the adequacy of the regulatory systems for crops created by conventional plant breeding in respect of their potential environmental impact.

However, concern over the environmental implications of herbicide-tolerant crops (whether produced by genetic modification or conventional methods) have been raised on several occasions by the Advisory Committee on Releases to the Environment (ACRE), in particular in their annual reports for 1996–97 and 1998.

The Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food is co-funding research on the management of genetically modified herbicide tolerant crops through the so-called BRIGHT project.

The guidelines developed by the industry grouping SCIMAC (Supply Chain Initiative on Modified Agricultural Crops) for growing herbicide tolerant crops also applies to both conventionally bred and genetically modified crops.

In their report on the EC Regulation of Genetic Modification in Agriculture at paragraph 178, the House of Lords Select Committee on the European Communities recommended that, from now on, any crop with novel traits which may have the potential to impact significantly on the environment should be subject to an oversight system.

In responding, the Government recognised that regulating on the basis of process rather than product could lead to anomalies and undertook to ask ACRE to advise what might be done to address the issue raised by the Committee. ACRE have now taken this task on. However the Government consider it right that the focus is on the genetic modification of organisms since this can result in the crossing of species barriers where potential risks have to be particularly carefully assessed and managed. The EC legislation on genetically modified organisms reflects this view.

Road Traffic

Mr. Cotter: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what estimate he has made of the volume of road traffic which is accounted for by journeys to and from places of work. [83041]

Ms Glenda Jackson *[holding answer 5 May 1999]:* In 1997, the volume of road traffic accounted for by journeys to and from places of work was about 97 billion km, 26 per cent. of the total of 368 billion km for all car and taxi traffic in Great Britain.

British Transport Police

Mrs. Curtis-Thomas: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what discussions he has had with representatives of British Transport Police on the future role and responsibilities of their service; and if he will make a statement. [84744]

Ms Glenda Jackson: The Government announced on 31 July 1998, *Official Report*, column *637*, their intention to seek to establish, when a suitable legislative opportunity arises, an independent national police authority for the British Transport Police (BTP). Subject to Parliament's approval the legislation would also place the jurisdiction of the BTP for all railway land (including the London Underground and the Docklands Light Railway) on a statutory basis. Following consultation the Home Secretary is also considering an extension to the BTP's jurisdiction outside the railways in specific circumstances. If acceptable this would also be included within the legislation. My officials meet regularly with senior officers from the BTP to discuss a range of issues.

Limestone Pavements

Mr. Dalyell: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will take steps to implement the measures to protect limestone pavements in the United Kingdom proposed by the Wildlife Trusts. [83843]

Mr. Meacher *[holding answer 20 May 1999]:* Limestone Pavement is a priority habitat under both the Habitats Directive and the UK Biodiversity Action Plan. Under the latter, the Wildlife Trusts are members of the Limestone Pavement Working Group, which is seeking to ensure no further losses in extent or quality. The Group is preparing a report on what further measures may be necessary, and I shall consider any recommendations carefully.

Recycling

Mr. Gordon Prentice: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will specify in contracts between his Department and construction companies the use of a minimum percentage of recycled materials; and if he will make a statement. [84898]

Mr. Raynsford: The Department follows the advice of the "Green guide for managers on the government estate", published in March 1999 to promote more sustainable construction. This guidance refers to the importance of using recycled materials and ensuring future recyclability in obtaining best value. The Environment Agency has adopted a target for the engineering works it procures that 20 per cent. of the aggregates used should be from secondary sources, while the Highways Agency is encouraging the adoption of material specifications which make recycling technically practical.

The Department is helping the Government Construction Clients' Panel to develop a methodology for assessing how well Departments and Agencies procure and manage their built assets against indicators of sustainability, which are expected to include criteria relating to the re-use and recycling of materials. In addition, the Department is working with representatives of the whole construction industry to develop a strategy for more sustainable construction. This strategy, which will set out how the industry intends to contribute to sustainable development, is due to be published later this year.

Butterflies (GM Pollen)

Mr. Baker: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will make a statement on the effect of genetically modified pollen on butterflies. [85285]

Mr. Meacher: I am aware of the recent report in "Nature" about the possible adverse effects of pollen from genetically modified insect resistant maize on the Monarch Butterfly in America. The maize in question has had a gene from a naturally occurring soil bacterium "*Bacillus thuringiensis* (Bt)" inserted which allows it to produce a toxin that kills corn boring insects.

Information from this laboratory study will be considered carefully, and ACRE will be asked to advise about the implications for existing approvals for the planting of this GM crop in the European Community. The GM crop used in the study is not being released in the United Kingdom, either experimentally or commercially. Since the European Corn Borer, the pest controlled by the Bt toxin, does not occur in the UK, this GM crop is unlikely to be grown here.

DETR are aware of potential risks of GM insect resistant crops to non-target and beneficial organisms, and are funding research to investigate these. This research will underpin regulatory decision making and inform ACRE's deliberations.

SSA Review

Mr. Burstow: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will list the objectives of the standard spending assessment review. [84968]

Mr. Meale: The broad objectives of the review of revenue grant distribution are set out in paragraph 5.16 of the White Paper, "Modern Local Government—In Touch with the People". These are:

> to investigate thoroughly whether there is a better way of determining the distribution of revenue support grant which is simpler, more stable, more robust and fairer than the present arrangements for SSAs.

Mr. Burstow: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what meetings he has had with Ministers of other Departments in connection with the review of standard spending assessments. [84969]

Mr. Meale: Details of meetings between Ministers are not disclosed in line with exemption 2 of part II of the Code of Practice on Access to Government Information.

Local Authorities (West Midlands)

Mr. Jim Cunningham: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what measures his Department has taken to develop mechanisms for sharing *(a)* information and *(b)* best practice between local authorities in the West Midlands. [85273]

Mr. Meale: The Government have established the Beacon Council Scheme to spread best practice among all local authorities. Beacon councils will host a nationwide programme of open days and other events which will enable all councils to share their experiences and learn from the best. Applications for beacon council status, to

be made by 31 July, have now been invited with publication of the brochure, "The Beacon Council Scheme: How to apply".

Walking and Cycling

Mr. Jim Cunningham: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what measures the Government are taking to increase walking and cycling in urban areas. [85260]

Ms Glenda Jackson: My Department is supporting the implementation of the National Cycling Strategy and we are about to publish a national strategy for encouraging walking.

We have made it clear to local highway authorities that we expect to see local cycling strategies and local walking strategies included in their Local Transport Plans. We have already issued detailed guidance to authorities on the features to be covered in Local Transport Plans.

We shall continue to publish technical advice for local authorities on measures and designs which will benefit cyclists and pedestrians.

Busking

Mr. Dismore: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions when he will make a decision on London Transport's proposals for changes in their byelaws concerning busking. [85319]

Ms Glenda Jackson: London Regional Transport and the train operating companies are in the process of making new byelaws. The majority of operators have submitted new byelaws to the Secretary of State. Once those from the remaining companies are received, the Secretary of State will consider all the representations from affected persons made in connection with the byelaws. In due course he will make a decision to approve, modify or refuse the byelaws.

Mr. Dismore: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what plans he has to consult buskers on the proposed London Transport byelaw changes relating to busking; and if he will make a statement. [85321]

Ms Glenda Jackson: There are no provisions in the legislation requiring the Secretary of State to consult interested parties before he makes his decision to approve, modify or refuse London Regional Transport's new byelaws. This was an issue for London Regional Transport to consider before they made their new byelaws. London Regional Transport were required to advertise the byelaws and invite persons affected to make representation to the Secretary of State. The Secretary of State will consider any representations, including those from buskers, before he makes his decision.

Mr. Dismore: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what criteria London Transport intends to apply when giving permission for individuals to busk on London Underground. [85320]

Ms Glenda Jackson: London Regional Transport have submitted new byelaws to the Secretary of State for his approval which would allow them to give written permission to buskers. The criteria to be applied would be a matter for London Regional Transport.

Air Circulation (Aeroplanes)

Mr. Worthington: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions (1) what regulations exist concerning the frequency with which air is circulated in planes; and what changes there have been to these in the past three years; [84790]

(2) what representations he has received about air circulation in planes; and what proposals he has to change the regulations relating to the circulation of air on planes; [84791]

(3) what health risks are associated with inadequate air circulation on planes; and what monitoring activity he undertakes. [84792]

Ms Glenda Jackson: We regularly receive correspondence from Members of Parliament and the public on this issue.

The standards for the ventilation of the passenger compartments of aircraft form part of the requirements under which individual aircraft types are certificated. The standard for new types of aircraft being placed on the UK register is contained in Joint Aviation Requirement 25—Large Aeroplanes. These requirements have not been changed in the last three years. However, they are in the process of being amended to reduce the maximum permitted amount of carbon dioxide to bring them into line with the equivalent US requirement.

The degree of re-circulation is determined by the aircraft designer and in some cases may be adjusted by the crew. Even when the air conditioning is set at its lowest level, the air in a modern aircraft cabin is changed every three minutes on average. The oxygen used by passengers is a small proportion, approximately 5 per cent. of the oxygen supplied at the minimum flow rate. The oxygen level in the cabin therefore remains at around 20 per cent. for the duration of a flight, which is almost the same as normal atmospheric oxygen levels.

There is no evidence of links between air quality, flow rates and the spread of disease. The filters used in most modern aircraft are similar to those used in critical wards of hospitals, operating theatres and burns units, and provide protection against the circulation of biological agents such as viruses. However, the spread of disease is facilitated when large numbers of people gather in close proximity. This has nothing to do with air quality but is a matter of personal contact.

While the re-circulation of air poses no risk, the air pressure in aircraft in flight, which is roughly equivalent to the atmospheric pressure at 8,000 feet above sea level, can affect people with respiratory diseases such as bronchitis, emphysema and bronchiolitis. Those affected are advised to consult their own doctor and the airline before travelling.

We have no plans to seek further changes to the JAR-25 requirements on air quality.

White Asbestos

Mr. Worthington: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will make a statement on progress being made on banning the importation, sale and use of white asbestos. [84877]

Mr. Meacher: On 25 May the Health and Safety Commission will consider draft Regulations to restrict further importation, supply and use of white asbestos. I expect to receive their recommendations by the end of the month.

Fireworks

Mr. Burden: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what assessment he has made of the levels of harassment and nuisance caused by misuse of fireworks. [84694]

Mr. Boateng: I have been asked to reply.

Fireworks, provided they are used sensibly and safely, can provide pleasant entertainment. I am, however, aware that the thoughtless misuse of fireworks by a small element of the population, mostly unsupervised children, can result in local disturbance, nuisance and harassment.

It is important, therefore, to regulate the sale of fireworks. Relevant legislation comprises the Explosives Act 1875, as modified by the Control of Explosives Regulations 1991 and as amended by the Explosives (Age of Purchase) Act 1976, the Consumer Protection Act 1987 and the Fireworks (Safety) Regulations 1997. Under the 1875 Act, it is an offence to discharge a firework in a street or public place. The 1997 Regulations, among other provisions, make it an offence to sell certain types of firework to any members of the general public and to sell other types to anyone under 18, or in some cases, under 16. There is a maximum penalty of £5,000 or six months' imprisonment or both.

For over 20 years, Government-organised firework safety awareness campaigns run in collaboration with local authority trading standards departments, fire services and the fireworks industry have aimed to heighten awareness of the dangers from the misuse of fireworks. The Government consider the safety of the public as paramount and will keep under consideration the effectiveness and coherence of legislation, policies and strategies to ensure that problems and potential problems are addressed in a practical way.

European Nuclear Installations

Ms Perham: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what risk assessment exercises have been undertaken with other European countries concerning the potential threat to the United Kingdom population from their nuclear installations over the millennium period. [84256]

Mr. Battle: I have been asked to reply.

The UK has long been aware of the potential risks from nuclear installations over the millennium period and has been co-operating for several years with countries in Europe and beyond, both on a bilateral basis and through the European Union, International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) and the OECD's Nuclear Energy Agency (NEA), to help ensure that any risks are properly addressed. The UK's nuclear safety regulator—the Health and Safety Executive's Nuclear Installations Inspectorate (NII)—keeps in proactive touch with the considerable activity in other countries to address safety issues and continues to follow developments closely.

In the event of any nuclear emergency, the IAEA and the European Union have established and tested international systems for early notification of any overseas nuclear accident. The UK also has bilateral arrangements for the early notification of any nuclear accident with a number of overseas governments. The Government's National Response Plan, co-ordinated by the Development of the Environment, Transport and the Regions, makes arrangements for the UK's response in dealing with any consequences of an overseas nuclear accident. This is supported by the RIMNET national radiation monitoring system, which gives the UK a second independent warning mechanism, should for any reason the early notification system fail.

PRIME MINISTER

European Army

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Prime Minister what discussions he has held with President Prodi on the establishment of a European army. [84092]

The Prime Minister: There is no question of creating a European army and there have therefore been no discussions on this matter with Mr. Prodi. We have, of course, already identified a need for renewed debate on European Union common foreign and security policy and the statement of principles agreed at the British-French Summit at St. Malo was an important step forward. Our aim is clear: to enable the European Union to have a more united and influential voice in world affairs. This must be backed up, when the need arises, by effective military capability. We are taking a leading role in this debate. We have, however, made clear that the deployment of forces must remain a decision for national Governments.

Ministerial Meetings

Mr. Gordon Prentice: To ask the Prime Minister what plans he has to hold regular formal meetings with the first Ministers of *(a)* the Scottish Parliament and *(b)* the National Assembly for Wales; and if he will make a statement. [84629]

The Prime Minister: I will meet Ministers and Secretaries from the devolved administrations from time to time.

Iraq

Mr. Dalyell: To ask the Prime Minister, pursuant to his oral answer of 12 May 1999, *Official Report*, column 309, for what reasons the Government have made no assessment of the effect of depleted uranium on the water supply, and water-table and on the health of the civilian population in Iraq. [84579]

The Prime Minister *[holding answer 18 May 1999]:* The Government have not seen any peer-reviewed epidemiological research data to support the claims that there has been an increase in ill-health in southern Iraq, attributed to the use of depleted uranium based ammunition by coalition forces during the 1990–1991 conflict.

The Government understand however that the World Health Organisation is in discussion with the Government of Iraq about proposals to improve health care in Iraq. The proposals—which are still at the outline stage—will only be developed into more detailed documents if the Iraqi Government decide to take the proposals forward.

Cabinet Meetings

Mr. Peter Bottomley: To ask the Prime Minister if he will make it his policy to answer questions on the length of Cabinet meetings. [85062]

The Prime Minister: I refer the hon. Member to the answer I gave to the hon. Member for Chesham and Amersham (Mrs. Gillan) on 30 April 1999, *Official Report*, column *281*.

Horse Industry

Mr. Blizzard: To ask the Prime Minister if he will assess the advantages of designating a lead department to deal with Government responsibilities in respect of the horse industry. [85209]

The Prime Minister: The Government recognise the economic importance of the horse industry in rural areas. A number of Government Departments currently have responsibility for different aspects of the horse industry and the division of these responsibilities is kept under review.

Cancer Treatment

Dr. Gibson: To ask the Prime Minister what plans he has to co-ordinate a meeting to discuss new cancer treatment initiatives. [85077]

The Prime Minister: I refer my hon. Friend to the reply I gave to my hon. Friend the Member for Shrewsbury and Atcham (Mr. Marsden) on 20 May 1999, *Official Report*, columns *401–02*.

HEALTH

Psychiatric Staff

Mr. Soley: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how many black and ethnic minority *(a)* psychiatrists and *(b)* community psychiatric nurses are currently registered in England and Wales. [84111]

Mr. Denham: The information available for England is given in the tables. These figures refer to England only. The statistics for Wales are the responsibility of my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Wales.

The Department is reviewing the collection of ethnic statistics with a view to improving the quality and coverage of the information we collect.

NHS Hospital and Community Health Services (HCHS): All doctors in the psychiatric speciality by ethnic group: England at 30 September 1997 — *Numbers*

		Ethnic groups				
	All staff	*White*	*Black*	*Asian*	*Other*	*Not known*
Psychiatry Group	6,620	4,300	310	950	620	450
Child and adolescent psychiatry	750	570	20	70	40	50
Forensic psychiatry	280	190	10	30	20	20
General psychiatry	4,220	2,640	220	650	410	290
Learning disabilities	500	300	20	90	60	30
Psychiatry of old age	710	460	30	100	80	40
Psychotherapy	180	140	0	10	10	20

Notes:
1. Figures rounded to nearest 10
2. '0' denotes 5 or less
3. Totals may not equal sum of components due to rounding

Source:
Department of Health—medical and dental workforce census

Number of staff in psychiatry group by ethnic groups and grade in England at 30 September 1997 — *Numbers*

		Ethnic groups				
	All staff	*White*	*Black*	*Asian*	*Other*	*Not known*
All staff	6,620	4,300	310	950	620	450
Consultant	2,450	1,770	70	260	180	170
Staff Grade	300	120	20	80	60	20
Associate Specialist	180	60	0	70	40	10
Registrar Group	1,280	910	70	130	100	70
Senior House Officer	1,380	790	120	220	130	110
House Officer	10	0	—	0	—	0
Hospital Practitioner	60	40	—	10	0	0
Clinical Assistant	980	610	20	180	110	60
Other	0	0	—	0	0	—

Notes:
1. Figures rounded to nearest 10
2. '—' denotes zero
3. '0' denotes 5 or less
4. Totals may not equal sum of components due to rounding

Source:
Department of Health—medical and dental workforce census

NHS Hospital and Community Health Services (HCHS): Nurses working in the area of community psychiatry, by ethnicity, in England as at 30 September 1997

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	All staff	*Ethnic groups* *White*	*Black*	*Asian*	*Other*	*Not known*
Total	10,720	9,200	430	190	510	390
Manager	190	170	10	10	10	*
Other 1st Level	8,380	7,120	290	160	380	250
Other 2nd Level	430	300	20	*	10	20
Nursing Assistant/Auxiliary	1,720	1,620	110	20	110	120

Notes:
1. Figures should be treated with caution as they are based upon the 68 per cent. of HCHS organisations reported 90 per cent. or more valid ethnic codes for non-medical staff.
2. Figures exclude learners and agency staff.
3. Figures are rounded to the nearest ten.
4. Due to rounding totals may not equal the sum of component parts.

Source:
Department of Health Non-Medical Workforce Census

Cancer Screening

Mr. Paul Marsden: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will list for each type of cancer the type and effectiveness of the screening tests currently available on the NHS; and if he will make a statement. [84688]

Mr. Hutton: There are currently two cancer screening programmes routinely available on the National Health Service.

The NHS Breast Screening Programme invites women aged 50–64 years for screening by mammography every three years. Since 1988 when the programme was introduced the United Kingdom death rate from breast cancer has been falling faster than the European average. Based on current detection rates it is estimated that the programme is saving up to 1,250 lives each year.

The NHS Cervical Screening programme invites women aged 20–64 years for a PAP test at least every five years. The test is designed to detect cervical abnormalities which if left undetected and untreated might develop into cancer. The incidence of cervical cancer has been falling at a rate of about 7 per cent. each year since the national programme was introduced in 1988 and experts estimate that the programme prevents around 3,900 cases of cancer per year. Further evidence from the Imperial Cancer Research Fund suggests that the cervical screening programme may have prevented 800 deaths in 1997.

Fluoride

Mr. Kidney: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what representations he has received about the addition of fluoride to drinking water in Staffordshire; and if he will make a statement. [84767]

Ms Jowell: The Green Paper "Our Healthier Nation", invited comments on the contribution which fluoridation can make to improved oral health. Of the 604 comments received from the West Midlands region 595 were in favour of fluoridation and nine opposed. We will be announcing our policy on fluoridation in a White Paper on public health which will be published shortly.

Royal Shrewsbury Hospital

Mr. Paul Marsden: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will list the elective waiting list totals for the Royal Shrewsbury Hospital for each month from May 1995 to date. [84861]

Mr. Hutton: The information requested is in the table.

Date	*Total waiting list*
June 1995	4,201
September 1995	4,269
December 1995	4,481
March 1996	4,358
June 1996	4,325
September 1996	4,083
December 1996	3,990
March 1997	4,245
June 1997	4,047
September 1997	4,057
December 1997	4,653
March 1998	5,422
May 1998	5,482
June 1998	5,362
July 1998	4,996
August 1998	4,827
September 1998	4,601
October 1998	4,337
November 1998	4,095
December 1998	4,058
January 1999	4,050
February 1999	3,966
March 1999	4,083

Eye Tests (Pensioners)

Mr. Paul Marsden: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will estimate how many pensioners in Shrewsbury and Atcham have had free eye tests since their introduction. [84864]

Mr. Denham: We estimate that there are some 21,000 residents aged 60 and over in Shrewsbury and Atcham and will therefore be eligible for a free National Health Service sight test. Some will have already been eligible for NHS tests on income grounds or because of predisposition to eye disease.

NHS Board Directors

Mr. Ennis: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how many directors serve on National Health Service trust boards operating in *(a)* Doncaster and *(b)* Barnsley; and how many of those directors reside in the Barnsley, East and Mexborough constituency. [84988]

Mr. Denham: The current non-executive directors serving on the boards of National Health Service trusts operating in Barnsley and Doncaster are shown in the table. Information is not held centrally on the Parliamentary constituencies in which directors reside.

Name	*Post type*	*Appointment*	*Term*	*Post town*
Barnsley Community and Priority Services NHS Trust				
Councillor Thomas Sheard	Chairman	1 December 1997	30 November 2001	Barnsley
Mr. Brian Key	Non-Executive Director	1 December 1997	30 November 2000	Barnsley
Mrs. Josephine Ruth Lees	Non-Executive Director	1 December 1996	30 November 1999	Barnsley
Mrs. Margaret Michaels	Non-Executive Director	1 December 1997	30 November 2001	Sheffield
Mr. Keith Ellis	Non-Executive Director	1 December 1998	30 November 1999	Barnsley
Mr. William Newman	Non-Executive Director	1 December 1997	30 November 2001	Barnsley
Barnsley District General Hospital NHS Trust				
Mr. Gordon E. Firth	Chairman	1 November 1998	31 October 2000	Barnsley
Ms Lynn Joyce Ambler	Non-Executive Director	1 November 1996	31 October 2000	Barnsley
Mr. C. Barry Taylor	Non-Executive Director	9 November 1998	31 October 2001	Barnsley
Mrs. Linda Burgess	Non-Executive Director	9 November 1998	31 October 2001	Near Barnsley
Mr. Robert Walker	Non-Executive Director	1 November 1996	31 October 2000	Sheffield
Mrs. Judith Watts	Non-Executive Director	4 November 1997	31 October 2001	Barnsley
Doncaster Healthcare NHS Trust				
Mr. David Bertram	Chairman	19 December 1997	30 November 2001	Doncaster
Mrs. Sheila Bryant	Non-Executive Director	1 December 1996	30 November 2000	Doncaster
Councillor Jean Maureen Elwick	Non-Executive Director	16 December 1997	30 November 2001	Doncaster
Mr. Graham K. Vaughan	Non-Executive Director	27 October 1998	30 November 2001	Doncaster
Mr. David Charles Miller	Non-Executive Director	11 December 1996	30 November 2000	Doncaster
Doncaster Royal Infirmary and Montagu Hospital NHS Trust				
Mr. Richard D. Kitson	Chairman	1 December 1996	30 November 2000	Doncaster
Mrs. Janet Conroy	Non-Executive Director	1 December 1998	30 November 2002	Near Doncaster
Mr. Thomas J. Keegan	Non-Executive Director	1 December 1998	30 November 2002	Doncaster
Mrs. June Hawley	Non-Executive Director	1 December 1997	30 November 2001	Near Doncaster
Mrs. Carol Shekle	Non-Executive Director	1 December 1996	30 November 2000	Doncaster
Mr. Colin D. Ambler	Non-Executive Director	12 October 1998	30 November 2001	Doncaster
South Yorkshire Metropolitan Ambulance and Paramedic Service NHS Trust				
Dr. Bernard Kingston	Chairman	16 January 1998	31 May 1999	Sheffield
Mrs. Patricia Battersby	Non-Executive Director	1 December 1998	30 November 2000	Sheffield
Mrs. Sandra Holland	Non-Executive Director	1 December 1997	30 November 2001	Doncaster
Mr. Sean Mahon	Non-Executive Director	1 December 1995	30 November 1999	Sheffield
Mrs. Anita Cartner	Non-Executive Director	1 December 1998	30 November 2001	Rotherham

Millennium Working

Mr. McDonnell: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what plans he has to introduce a national scheme to compensate nurses who will be working over the millennium period. [84977]

Mr. Denham: We have no plans to agree any new specific national arrangements for staff over the millennium period. Guidance was issued to the National Health Service in Health Service Circular 1999/097, copies of which are available in the Library.

Anaphylaxis

Mr. Duncan: To ask the Secretary of State for Health (1) what advice is issued by his Department to local education authorities over the treatment of children of school age suffering anaphylactic allergic reactions; [85264]

(2) what advice his Department has received on the appropriate treatment of anaphylactic allergic reactions in school children, from *(a)* the Anaphylaxis Campaign and *(b)* professional bodies; [85265]

(3) what guidelines his Department has issued to local health authorities on the provision of advice to local education authorities in developing care plans for pupils suffering from potentially life-threatening medical conditions. [85266]

Ms Jowell: The Department and the Department for Education and Employment issued joint guidance in October 1996 on "Supporting pupils with medical needs in schools". The guidance, which was sent to health authorities and local education authorities, covers treatment and the development of healthcare plans for pupils suffering from potentially life threatening medical conditions, including anaphylaxis. It was produced after extensive consultation with interested parties, including professional bodies and voluntary organisations such as the Anaphylaxis Campaign.

In March 1999 the Department and the Department for Education and Employment launched a new website, "Wired for Health", to provide teachers with health information on a range of conditions, including

anaphylaxis. The website gives direct access to advice from the Anaphylaxis Campaign on anaphylaxis and schools.

Long-term Care

Mr. Burstow: To ask the Secretary of State for Health, pursuant to his answer of 18 May 1999, *Official Report*, column *321*, concerning long-term care, if his Department will assist interested bodies in promoting a full public debate on the findings of the Royal Commission. [85057]

Mr. Hutton: The Royal Commission's report has already stimulated an important debate on this complex issue and the Department has been happy to assist that, as well as responding to the hundreds of contributions received in correspondence from individuals and organisations. We will continue to take account of the views of all interested parties and use these to inform decisions we make on the proposals over the coming months.

Cancer Treatment Initiatives

Dr. Gibson: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what plans he has to co-ordinate a meeting to discuss new cancer treatment initiatives. [85078]

Mr. Hutton: I refer my hon. Friend to the reply my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister gave my hon. Friend the Member for Shrewsbury and Atcham (Mr. Marsden) on 20 May 1999, *Official Report*, columns *401–02*.

Medical Student Places

Dr. Gibson: To ask the Secretary of State for Health when he expects to publish his list of new medical student places. [85079]

Mr. Denham: Allocation of student places to universities in England is the responsibility of the Higher Education Funding Council for England. The Funding Council is working with my Department to produce recommendations for the allocation of additional medical student places, and an announcement is expected in the next few weeks.

Investing in Dentistry

Mr. Steen: To ask the Secretary of State for Health (1) what reasons underlay the refusal of the bid for funding under the Investing in Dentistry scheme submitted by Paul Carlin of Shipley Bridge, South Brent, Devon; [84078]

(2) how many dental practices in England and Wales have received funding under the Investing in Dentistry project in each year since its inception; and if he will provide a breakdown of what it has been spent on. [84206]

Mr. Denham: The Investing in Dentistry (IID) initiative only applied to General Dental Services in England. IID was launched in September 1997 and continued until April this year. Requests for funding could be submitted to my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State at any time during this period. To date, 282 IID funding requests have been approved, primarily to help towards the cost of opening new dental practices, relocating existing practices to larger premises, and providing extra surgeries. A further 140 are currently being assessed.

Mr. Carlin's Investing in Dentistry funding request was refused because it did not meet the requirements of the IID scheme. The criteria used in deciding on proposals is set out in the circular Health Service Guidance (97) 38, copies of which are available in the Library.

Nursing Homes (Care Costs)

Mr. Field: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will estimate the average cost of four years' care in a nursing home. [75527]

Mr. Hutton: The average cost of four years' care in a nursing home for elderly people is estimated to be £73,000.

Mr. Field: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what proportion of *(a)* those people who have been in long-term care or nursing homes for four years or more and *(b)* all people in long-term care or nursing homes continue to pay part or all of their fees. [75528]

Mr. Hutton: Information is not collected in the form requested, but we estimate that about 9 per cent. of people in nursing homes make no contribution to the cost of their care as they have been placed by the National Health Service. All others contribute in part or in full.

Aricept

Dr. Cable: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what assessment his Department has made of *(a)* the social costs and benefits of Aricept for Alzheimer's patients and *(b)* the savings in respite and other long-term care resulting from the use of Aricept. [84274]

Mr. Hutton: The Department has made no such assessment.

The Health Technology Assessment (HTA) programme is considering a research project looking at "new drugs for dementia". Full proposals will be considered at a specially convened meeting in June which will include Professor Tom Walley (Chair of the HTA pharmaceutical Panel) and Professor Kent Woods (Director of HTA). Due account will be taken of the findings of the AD 2000 project, a large trial organised through West Midlands National Health Service Regional Office, which has included consideration of the social costs and benefits of Aricept for Alzheimer's disease and the savings in respite and other long-term care resulting in the use of Aricept.

Audiology Services

Mr. Hammond: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what cost benefit analysis his Department has carried out or draws upon to inform its current policy towards the supply of digital hearing aids through the NHS. [84304]

Mr. Hutton: Digital technology in hearing aids is very new so at this stage only manufacturers' evaluations are available and there is no independent cost benefit analysis. National Heath Service trusts purchase hearing aids from a range that is supplied by the NHS Supplies Authority and they may also purchase hearing aids from commercial suppliers to meet individual clinical need.

ATTORNEY-GENERAL

NATO Operations

Mr. Malins: To ask the Attorney-General if he will place in the Library copies of the external legal advice taken by Her Majesty's Government on the legality of the present NATO operations against Serbia. [85076]

The Attorney-General: Any legal advice taken by Her Majesty's Government on this, or on any other matter, is subject to legal privilege and thus confidential.

TRADE AND INDUSTRY

Postal Services (Pathway Scheme)

Mr. Boswell: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry (1) if he will make a statement on the implications for the Post Office of the Pathway Scheme; [84051]

(2) what evaluation he has made of the role of information technology in developing postal and other services in rural areas; [84054]

(3) what evaluation he has made of the benefits of the Pathway project for the viability of sub-post offices. [84052]

Mr. Byers *[holding answers 13 May 1999]:* The Government today reached agreement in principle with ICL about the continuation of the Horizon project to computerise the Post Office network and automate the payment of benefits.

The changes to the Horizon project are aimed to put it on a sustainable footing for the future and allow the Post Office to move as quickly as possible to the computerisation of post office counter services.

The main elements of the agreement are:

First, we will be moving forward as planned, as quickly as possible with the automation of Post Office Counter services. For the first time ever, Post Offices will have an up to date automation platform, helping them to provide a better service to their customers, and representing a major investment in the future of the nationwide network of Post Offices.

We have agreed with ICL to remove the magnetic strip benefit payment card from the project. Given the delays, this is now an outdated concept and the Banks, among others, are already moving away from magnetic strip in favour of the next generation technology—the smart card. For the future, we intend to move from the traditional paper-based methods of payment to a more modern and efficient way of paying benefits through the Post Office network, building on banking technology. POCL and DSS/BA will be working together on plans to introduce the new arrangements in 2003. The Government can give an assurance that those benefit recipients who wish to collect their benefits in cash at Post Offices will continue to be able to do so.

In the interim, we will be using bar-coding on order books to tackle benefit fraud. This will provide savings of around £100 million a year, a saving originally promised by the last administration but not yet delivered.

We and ICL believe the target of achieving the computerisation of the network of 18,000 Post Offices by the end of 2001 is more realistic. This will give customers a better service and help to secure a viable future for the network of Post Offices.

Parental Leave

Ms Harman: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry, pursuant to his answer to the hon. Member for Bolton West, (Ms Kelly) of 12 May 1999, *Official Report*, columns *145–46*, on parental leave, what estimate he has made of the average length of leave which will be taken by *(a)* mothers and *(b)* fathers. [85090]

Mr. Ian McCartney: For the purposes of the Regulatory Impact Assessment for the Employment Relations Bill, it was assumed that the average length of leave for those taking parental leave would be ten weeks for mothers and for fathers. A copy of the Regulatory Impact Assessment was placed in the Library of the House.

EU Structural Funds (Scotland)

Mr. Steinberg: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what protocols have been agreed between his Department and the Scottish Office in relation to the expenditure of European Structural Funds in Scotland and compliance with rules and conditions imposed by the European Union; and how he intends to apply such protocols to the funding of the proposed funicular railway on the Cairngorm. [85263]

Mr. Wills: There are no protocols agreed between my Department and the Scottish Office relating to European Structural Funds; the two Departments are working closely together to consider the impact of devolution. Administration of the Structural Funds in Scotland and funding of individual projects there are a matter for the Scottish Office.

Fuel Costs

Dr. Marek: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry if he will request the Director General of Electricity Supply and Gas Supply to produce figures for the average annual cost of fuel used by *(a)* pensioners and *(b)* other domestic users. [84786]

Mr. Battle *[holding answer 20 May 1999]:* Energy consumption varies from household to household across the whole population. It is dependent on many factors, such as energy efficiency of the home, time spent in the property, size of property etc. Accurate and timely data on energy consumption by pensioners are not available.

Annual fuel bills for typical and low-volume household consumers are presented in the table. Bills are based on latest 1999 prices and include VAT.

£

	Electricity	*Gas*
Typical consumption[1]	263.70	302.59
Low volume consumption[2]	187.68	218.78

[1] Annual consumption 3,300 kWh for electricity, 18,000 kWh for gas

[2] Annual consumption 2,200 kWh for electricity, 12,000 kWh for gas

Partnership Fund

Mr. Coleman: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry if he will give further details about the proposed Partnership Fund. [85474]

Mr. Byers: The Government intend to make available up to £5 million over the next four years through the Partnership Fund. The fund will help develop partnerships at work by supporting partnership projects in the workplace and encouraging the spread of information about best practice.

Statutory authority for funding in this area is being sought through Clause 26 of the Employment Relations Bill. Support will be available for up to 50 per cent. of total eligible costs of individual projects, up to a limit of £50,000 support per project. It will be a requirement of support that projects should have matching funding of at least 50 per cent. from non-public sector sources.

The Fund will be launched and a first call for proposals announced once the Employment Relations Bill has received Royal Assent.

CULTURE, MEDIA AND SPORT

National Lottery (Scotland)

Mr. Donohoe: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport if he will provide a breakdown of National Lottery Funds distributed by Scottish local authority area for each year since the National Lottery was set up. [84366]

Mr. Banks: To date 6,164 awards worth a total of £615,445,091 have been made in Scotland. This total includes Scotland-wide projects and projects which cannot be allocated to a particular local authority. A breakdown by Scottish local authorities for each distributing body has been placed in the Libraries of the House.

Awards information is also available on the Lottery website at www.lottery.culture.gov.uk.

FOREIGN AND COMMONWEALTH AFFAIRS

General Affairs Council

Mr. Rammell: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what was the outcome of the General Affairs Council held in Brussels on 17 and 18 May; and if he will make a statement. [85240]

Ms Quin: My right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary and I attended the General Affairs Council and the EU/Russia Co-operation Council on 17 May. There was a meeting of the European Economic Area Council on the 18 May. The Council adopted the A points listed in document 8136/99 and noted the resolutions, decisions and opinions adopted by the European Parliament in its sessions of 12–16 April, listed in document 7187/99. Copies of the documents listing the A points and resolutions will be placed in the House Libraries as soon as they become available.

Western Balkans

The Council adopted conclusions regretting President Milosevic's failure to accept the international community's conditions; reiterating its support for the elected government of Montenegro; welcoming President Ahtisaari's mission; stressing the need for a UN Security Council Resolution; highlighting the need for EU assistance to reach Albania, Macedonia and Montenegro quickly; and agreeing to begin work on an EU Common Strategy on the Western Balkans. The Council also agreed that a Stability Pact for South East Europe should be established, and endorsed a draft text as the basis for further talks between the EU and other parties to the Pact.

EU/Charter of Rights

The Council had a preliminary discussion of Presidency proposals for an EU Charter of Rights. There will be further discussion at the 31 May GAC.

Institutional reform

The Council discussed the timing, scope and preparation of an inter-governmental conference, as envisaged by the Protocol on reform of the Institutions annexed to the Amsterdam Treaty. Final decisions will be taken by the Cologne European Council.

Common European Policy on Security and Defence

Ministers also discussed a draft Presidency report which will be submitted to the Cologne European Council. The report sets out principles to be observed when considering possible new defence arrangements allowing the European Union to take on crisis management, peace-keeping and conflict prevention tasks.

EU/US Relations

The Commission reported on the latest developments in the beef hormones dispute. The Council stressed the importance of handling the dispute in a constructive and positive manner and invited the Commission to intensify contacts with the US and Canada. The Council encouraged further efforts to secure agreement on compensation should the US and Canada pursue WTO authorisation for retaliatory measures. The Council welcomed the Commission's intention to evaluate, with Member States, possible next steps and to keep the Council fully informed.

EU Assistance to Central America

Council agreed the general outline of a Commission Action Plan to provide assistance to Central America in the aftermath of Hurricane Mitch. Ministers welcomed the opportunity to discuss the plan with the beneficiary countries at the EU/Central America Ministerial in Bonn on 20 May. The Council agreed that the indicative amount of 250 meuro in the Commission plan was without prejudice to the overall spending allocations under Category 4 (external expenditure) of the EC budget. The Council invited the Commission to bring forward an assessment of external spending priorities for the period 2000–2006.

EU/Egypt

The Council reviewed the progress made in the latest negotiating round with Egypt. The relevant Council bodies will examine the current package further with a view to conclusion at the 31 May GAC if at all possible.

Russia Common Strategy

Ministers agreed a Common Strategy on Russia, which will be submitted for adoption to the Cologne European Council. It sets clear objectives for the EU's relations with Russia with the aim of supporting democratic and economic reforms, and enhancing co-operation with Russia on international affairs and on matters of common concern such as organised crime and environmental problems.

East Timor

Ministers agreed the need for a substantial EU contribution to the UN Trust Fund for East Timor and asked the Commission to look urgently at options for funding.

Belarus

The Council adopted a declaration calling on the Government of Belarus to enter into political dialogue with the opposition.

Nigeria

In view of the progress made towards the transition to democracy and the impending installation of civilian Government the Council decided to repeal the EU Common Position on Nigeria (98/614/CFSP) containing the remaining sanctions with effect from 1 June 1999.

EU/Russia Co-operation Council

The EU Common Strategy on Russia, and Kosovo, were the main topics discussed at the EU/Russia Co-operation Council on 17 May. Detailed points implementation of the Partnership and Co-operation Agreement will be dealt with at the next meeting of the Co-operation Committee.

European Economic Area Council

The 11th EEA Council assessed the functioning of the EEA Agreement, reviewed developments in regional issues and European integration, and discussed political issues.

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will make a statement on the nature of the social security provision agreed at the Luxembourg General Affairs Council of 26 and 27 April. [83930]

Ms Quin: From time to time it is necessary to amend the EC Regulations, which co-ordinate the operation of Member States' social security schemes, to take account of changes in legislation of the Member States or to effect improvements in the provisions where a deficiency in the existing arrangements comes to light. The social security provisions agreed at the Luxembourg General Affairs Council on 26 and 27 April related to amendments of this type. The only amendment of direct concern to the UK was to an Annex of the co-ordinating Regulations. This was to clarify which is the competent State for payment of UK Family Credit and Irish Family Income Supplement for workers who are resident in Ireland and work in the UK, or vice versa.

Mr. Mohammed Fayed

Mr. Gerald Howarth: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if the authorities investigating the unauthorised publication of the identities of British security agents plan to take evidence from Mr. Mohammed Fayed. [84738]

Mr. Robin Cook: The Metropolitan Police are conducting investigations into possible breaches of the Official Secrets Act 1989, but these investigations are an operational matter for the police and it would not be right for me to comment on any inquiries they may be undertaking.

Cyprus

Mr. Cox: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs how many Greek Cypriot *(a)* men, *(b)* women and *(c)* children up to the age of 16 years are living in the Karpas area of occupied northern Cyprus; and if he will make a statement. [84951]

Ms Quin: According to UNFICYP figures there are 450 Greek Cypriots living in the Karpas. We do not have figures showing the proportion of men and women. In addition to the 30 children who attend the Greek school in Rizokarpasso, there are a number of pre-school children in the Karpas.

Mr. Cox: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what action his Department has taken in conjunction with the British High Commission in Cyprus to support projects to encourage contacts between Greek and Turkish Cypriots living in Cyprus; and if he will list the projects that have been supported in each of the last three years. [84963]

Ms Quin: Until December 1997 bi-communal contact was possible but difficult. The High Commission worked hard in the period May 1996 to December 1997 to bring members of the Greek Cypriot and Turkish Cypriot communities together. They created the Westminster group to promote the principles of democracy through bi-communal contacts with members of all professions and organised its meetings, arranged meetings of Chevening scholars, and brought members of both communities together through other events such as the Queen's birthday party and the Education fair. In addition, members of the High Commission have assisted with and participated in many other events sponsored by the UN and other bodies to bring members of the two communities together.

Since December 1997 most bi-communal contacts have been banned by the Turkish Cypriot side. We have therefore found it effectively impossible to arrange bi-communal contacts on-island. But we arranged a meeting on 24 March in London of Cypriot Chevening scholars in co-operation with the Friends of Cyprus. We also continue to support the work of other in this field, notably the Trade Unions.

Mr. Cox: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs when an official of the British High Commission in Cyprus last visited the Karpas area in occupied northern Cyprus; and what report of that visit has been produced. [84964]

Ms Quin: A member of the British High Commission last visited the Greek Cypriot community in the Karpas on 7 May as part of a regular series of visits to that area. The High Commission reports no significant changes in living conditions since the previous visit in October 1998.

Mr. Cox: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what surveys have been carried out to establish the number of Turkish Cypriots who were born in Cyprus, and still live in northern Cyprus; and if he will make a statement. [84939]

Ms Quin: In November 1997 the Turkish Cypriot authorities published the results of a census carried out the previous year which found that, of 200,587 people resident in the northern part of the island, 137,398 had been born in Cyprus.

These figures are accepted among Turkish Cypriots as generally accurate, but we have no means of independent corroboration.

Overseas Posts (E-mail and Internet Links)

Mr. Dismore: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs how many *(a)* Embassies and High Commissions and *(b)* Consulates have e-mail and internet links available to hon. Members. [84941]

Mr. Tony Lloyd: The FCO has provided 112 of its Embassies and High Commissions and 43 of its Consulates with facilities to send and receive internet e-mail.

UN Security Council

Mr. Gordon Prentice: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what his policy

is on changes to the membership of the permanent members of the UN Security Council; and if he will make a statement. [84895]

Mr. Tony Lloyd: The Government support early enlargement of the Security Council in both permanent and non-permanent categories. It supports the addition of five permanent seats: one each for Germany and Japan, and three for developing countries in Africa, Asia and Latin America and the Caribbean. It also supports the addition of up to four non-permanent seats, making an expanded Council of 24.

Kosovo

Mr. Norman: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what provision he has made to provide advice and guidance to UK-based relatives of persons involved in the Kosovo crisis who wish to bring their families to the United Kingdom. [84852]

Mr. Mike O'Brien: Advice and guidance for United Kingdom-based relatives of persons involved in the Kosovo crisis has been drawn up by the Home Office in consultation with the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), the British Red Cross and the Refugee Council. This has been distributed to all Government Departments and non-governmental organisations concerned including any ethnic Albanian organisation that requested it.

The Kosovo Unit of the Home Office has dealt with in the region of 1,000 telephone calls from United Kingdom-based relatives of persons involved in the crisis and offered appropriate guidance on the steps they, and their relatives, should take. This advice is that those members of the public who wish to bring their families to the United Kingdom from the Kosovo region should contact the British Red Cross United Kingdom Family Reunion Service who are liaising with UNHCR and the Home Office in the compilation of family lists.

UNHCR have recently confirmed that they are unable to undertake this role other than in the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia. In order to help UNHCR and at their request, a Home Office team went out to the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia on 9 May to assist with the process of registering refugees. We are considering how this initiative might be widened to assist with family reunion applications in the wider region. These will be considered in accordance with our family reunion concession. This provides for close family members (spouse and minor children and in exceptional circumstances, a family member who formed part of the family unit before fleeing to seek asylum) to join any persons who are settled or granted asylum in the United Kingdom. This concession is being extended to families in the United Kingdom who have been granted exceptional leave to enter as part of UNHCR's Humanitarian Evacuation Programme.

Revised guidance is being prepared to reflect these new arrangements, also in consultation with UNHCR, the British Red Cross and the Refugee Council. The initial advice to family members to register details of relatives in the region with the offices of the British Red Cross in the United Kingdom remains valid.

HOME DEPARTMENT

Prisons (Education)

Mr. Beith: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what were the *(a)* total hours of education study and *(b)* total teaching hours bought in the Prison Service in 1998; and what was the percentage change for each on the previous year. [84748]

Mr. George Howarth: The total number of taught student hours for 1998 was 9,483,889, an increase of 6.19 per cent. on the 1997 figure.

The total number of teaching hours purchased by the Prison Service in 1998 was 1,254,040, an increase of 7.69 per cent. on the 1997 figure.

In addition to this, just over £10 million per annum for the three years from 1 April 1999 has been allocated to enhance education provision. It will be used to deliver an additional 2,000,000 hours of basic and key skills education which will produce 17,000 accreditations.

Mr. Boswell: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what plans he has to encourage liaison between the Prison Education Service and the University for Industry. [85267]

Mr. George Howarth: There are very positive discussions currently taking place between the Prison Education Service and the University for Industry. It is the intention of the Prison Service to respond to the University for Industry's call for partners and apply to become a learning centre hub with local learning centres being developed in individual prisons in partnership with education providers.

Prison Violence

Mr. Beith: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many *(a)* self-inflicted deaths, *(b)* incidents of self harm, *(c)* reported assaults of prisoners on other prisoners and *(d)* reported assaults of prisoners on members of staff took place in each young offenders institution and in total in (i) 1997–98 and (ii) 1998–99; and if he will make a statement. [84747]

Mr. George Howarth: The information requested is given in the tables.

1997–98

Young offender institutions	*Self-inflicted deaths*	*Incidents of self-harm*	*Assaults (prisoner on prisoner)*	*Assaults (prisoner on staff)*
Aylesbury	1	32	54	45
Castington	0	13	40	8
Deerbolt	0	87	65	11
Dover	0	10	16	9
Feltham	2	292	11	5
Glen Parva	0	136	78	16
Guys Marsh	0	28	11	2
Hatfield	0	1	10	0
Huntercombe	0	18	20	7
Onley	0	75	102	25
Portland	0	16	10	1
Reading	1	72	18	8
Stoke Heath	0	61	21	6
Swinfen Hall	0	13	13	8
Thorn Cross	0	1	17	3
Wetherby	0	24	34	5
Totals	4	879	520	159

1998–99

Young offender institutions	*Self-inflicted deaths*	*Incidents of self-harm* [1]	*Assaults (prisoner on prisoner)*	*Assaults (prisoner on staff)*
Aylesbury	0	71	39	78
Castington	0	22	70	32
Deerbolt	0	75	44	13
Dover	0	7	20	8
Feltham	0	275	17	5
Glen Parva	2	107	152	39
Guys Marsh	0	23	7	4
Hatfield	0	2	10	0
Huntercombe	0	9	27	8
Onley	0	71	119	40
Portland	0	34	12	5
Reading	1	31	4	1
Stoke Heath	0	102	22	9
Swinfen Hall	0	8	19	11
Thorn Cross	0	0	31	0
Wetherby	0	40	48	14
Totals	3	877	641	267

[1] Provisional figure based on 98 per cent. of expected Prison Service establishment returns received to date.

Note:

Incidents do not equate to numbers of prisoners since an individual prisoner may self-harm more than once.

Total number of reported incidents (all prison types)

	1997–98	*1998–99*
Self-inflicted deaths	74	82
Incidents of self-harm	7,023	6,603
Assaults—prisoner on prisoner	2,902	3,673
Assaults—prisoner on staff	1,387	1,640

Notes:

1. Establishments have been categorised according to their primary role. However, it should be noted that there are a number of other prisons that hold young offenders (e.g. male remand centres) which are not included.
2. Not all self-inflicted deaths conclude with a verdict of suicide.

Prisoners (Employment)

Mr. Beith: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many prisoners are employed on work which involves payment from the private sector; and if he will make a statement. [84749]

Mr. George Howarth: The number of prisoners employed in public sector prisons on work which involves payment from the private sector is approximately 4,500. In addition, 3,400 prisoners in privately managed prisons undertake activities, including education, work in the prison kitchen, cleaning and employment in industries, for which they receive payment.

Young Offenders

Dr. Cable: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what plans he has to improve recruitment and retention of health care staff in *(a)* Feltham Young Offenders Unit and *(b)* other young offender units. [84848]

Mr. George Howarth: Conventional recruitment and retention measures are now supplemented at Feltham by arrangements with the local NHS mental health secure unit to provide a number of qualified psychiatric nurses to assist Feltham's delivery of health care. Meetings are also being held with the local health authority to produce a specification for the provision of nursing services at Feltham.

The Prison Service's Directorate of Health Care has commissioned research to look at the current national problem of recruitment and retention of health care staff within the Service. This will produce recommendations on the best way forward.

Dr. Cable: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what plans he has to increase the speed of transfer of inmates sectioned under the Mental Health Acts from young offender units to other institutions. [84845]

Mr. George Howarth: The Government have accepted the recommendations in the report of the joint Prison Service/National Health Service executive working group on the future organisation of prison health care, published on 29 March 1999, aimed at providing that the National Health Service takes a greater role in the provision of health care to prisoners, especially those with mental health problems.

Implementation of the recommendations should greatly assist the assessment and transfer process. The Department of Health strategy document "Modernising Mental Health Services—Safe, Sound and Supportive", published last December, indicated that, among other measures, steps were being taken to expand the number of secure psychiatric places within the NHS.

Dr. Cable: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what plans he has to introduce a specific profession of prison officer for young offender institutions and for young offenders in prison. [84850]

Mr. George Howarth: The Government have no plans to introduce a separate profession for prison officers working with young offenders. However, the Prison Service is developing accredited training specifically for staff who work with young offenders. It is also revising its selection criteria to enable establishments with offenders under 18 to recruit the most suitable staff.

Dr. Cable: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what plans he has to seek funding from local education authorities for the education of young offenders who are in custody. [84851]

Mr. George Howarth: There are no plans to seek funding from Local Education Authorities for the education of young offenders who are in custody.

Dr. Cable: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department (1) what funding is available for the Sex Offender Treatment Programme for juveniles and young offenders in Feltham Young Offenders Unit; [84837]

(2) what plans he has to ensure that the Sex Offender Treatment Programme continues to be provided at Feltham Young Offenders Unit. [84838]

Mr. George Howarth: Feltham has until now been able to provide the Sex Offenders Treatment Programme without specific funding.

However, the current review of the secure juvenile estate will bring about changes to Feltham's accommodation and regime that may make it difficult for the establishment to continue to provide the Programme without extra funding. Its continuation will, therefore, depend on the outcome of the reviews which are currently taking place of the juvenile estate and regimes for young offender institutions, and the outcome of a bid for capital funding.

Feltham will, in any event, endeavour to provide one further Sex Offender Treatment Programme this year.

Dr. Cable: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department (1) what plans he has *(a)* to provide education and *(b)* to improve the provision of education to young people on remand other than those under school leaving age in (i) Feltham Young Offenders Unit and (ii) other young offenders units; [84834]

(2) what plans he has to increase the provision of education to convicted inmates over school leaving age in Feltham Young Offenders Unit. [84836]

Mr. George Howarth: There are no plans to increase the provision of education to either convicted or remand prisoners over school leaving age at Feltham.

Governors of Prison Service establishments have delegated budgets from which they purchase teaching and induction hours against a national contract for educational services which is managed at a local level. Prison Education for all prisoners focuses on the core curriculum of basic educational skills (literacy and numeracy), life and social skills and computers. The Young Offender Institution Rules 1988 (as amended) require education arrangements appropriate to his or her needs to be made for any prisoner aged 17 or over who has special educational needs, if necessary within the normal working week. Otherwise, education for prisoners over school leaving age is entirely voluntary. Prisoners aged between 17 and 21 should be offered at least two hours a week of physical education.

Other important developments to enhance education for young offenders generally include:

A broader model educational curriculum for juveniles to include an action plan and timetable for each juvenile based on an in depth assessment;

Work with the Basic Skills Agency to develop ways of delivering basic skills training to prisoners in the workplace, to support the Service's Welfare to Work pilots and to develop family literacy projects and prisoner literacy mentoring; and

Work with specialist educational consultants on how best to screen prisoners for dyslexia and then how best to support prisoners with this learning need.

Dr. Cable: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what funding is available to young offender units for the young offenders training programme; and how it is allocated. [84839]

Mr. George Howarth: The Young Offender Treatment Programme is a new offending behaviour programme being developed under the Prison Service programme accreditation scheme. Finance has been earmarked to enable a number of young offender establishments, including Feltham, to pilot the programme. The Prison Service is currently considering how this work should be taken forward and no decisions have yet been taken on allocation of earmarked finance.

Dr. Cable: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what is the recommended ratio of probationary and qualified prison officer staff to juveniles in young offender units; and what plans he has to change this. [84840]

Mr. George Howarth: There is no recommended ratio for the number of probationary and qualified prison officers to under 18 year olds in young offender institutions, and we do not have plans to introduce one. The proportion of newly appointed to experienced staff varies from one establishment to another because the turnover of staff varies. The Prison Service is preparing to introduce selection and training arrangements tailored to the needs of establishments in the new under-18 estate which should help address some of the recruitment and retention difficulties some establishments experience.

Dr. Cable: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what recommendations and guidelines are issued on the education of *(a)* juveniles and *(b)* young offenders other than those under school leaving age who are in young offender units. [84833]

Mr. George Howarth: The Young Offender Institution Rules 1988 (as amended) require the provision of 15 hours academic education per week for sentenced prisoners under the age of 17 years. The education provided includes English, Mathematics, life skills relevant to their age, and Information Technology and a minimum of five hours of physical education per week. In the case of sentenced prisoners aged 17 years with learning difficulties, there is a requirement to provide education appropriate to their needs.

The core curriculum is set out in a Prison Service Order called the Prison Service education national curriculum framework, a copy of which is in the Library.

The Prison Service is currently developing new regime standards for young people under the age of 18. They will include the development of a broader education curriculum for young people under school leaving age which will take into account their particular learning difficulties, especially dyslexia, attention deficits and hyper-activity disorder and any statement of educational needs. The Comprehensive Spending Review has made additional funds available for achieving these new standards.

The Prison Service is also planning to introduce an individual programme for each young person. It will be based on a thorough assessment and will include an action plan and programme suited to individual needs, ability and aptitude.

Dr. Cable: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what *(a)* recommendations and *(b)* guidelines he has issued on convicted juveniles sharing cells with remand juveniles in young offenders institutions. [84849]

Mr. George Howarth: Prison Service policy on the separation of different classes of prisoner is set out in the Instruction to Governors 48/1995 which was issued on 11 May 1995, a copy of which is in the Library.

Dr. Cable: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many hours of education were provided at Feltham Young Offenders Unit in each of the last three years; and how many hours are planned for the current year. [84835]

Mr. George Howarth: The number of teaching hours purchased at Feltham Young Offenders Institution in each of the last three years was:

	Teaching hours
1998	17,605
1997	13,131
1996	[1]12,000

[1] This is an approximate figure

As part of the new education contract which was awarded to North East Surrey College of Technology to commence on 1 January 1999 the number of teaching hours ordered for the 12 month period to 31 December 1999 is 17,500.

Dr. Cable: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many inmates at the Feltham Young Offenders' Unit Health Centre who have been assessed as having mental health problems are currently waiting transfers to *(a)* hospitals and *(b)* other secure institutions. [84841]

Mr. George Howarth: On 18 May 1999 eight prisoners at Feltham Young Offenders Institution for whom mental health assessments had been completed were awaiting admission to hospitals under provisions of Part III of the Mental Health Act 1983. Prisoners who require in-patient treatment for mental disorders are only transferred to psychiatric hospitals.

Prison Boards of Visitors

Dr. Cable: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what guidelines are issued to prison boards of visitors about the publication of their reports. [84847]

Mr. George Howarth: The Boards of Visitors Secretariat issues detailed guidance to Boards of Visitors about the publication of their annual reports. Since September 1987, Ministers have urged Boards to publish annual reports. Boards of Visitors are independent, and it is up to each Board to decide whether it will publish its annual report or not. Boards are urged not to publish information which would risk compromising the security of the prison. They are also urged not to identify individual members of staff or prisoners by name.

Guidance is issued on the preparation of press releases, and how to deal with the media. Boards of Visitors also have access to advice from the Boards of Visitors Press and Public Relations Officer.

Case Allocation Unit

Mr. Clappison: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department, pursuant to his answer of 13 May 1999, *Official Report*, column *189*, how many files were received by the Case Allocation Unit; and what were the locations, apart from Case Management units, to which files were sent in the week ended 8 May. [84886]

Mr. Mike O'Brien: During the week ending 8 May, the Case Allocation Unit received a total of 10,032 files. 1,251 files were sent to the Work in Progress Store and 22 files were sent to lay by. A further 272 files were sent to other locations, but information about the locations to which they were sent is not collected.

Rape Charges

Mr. Cox: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many *(a)* men and *(b)* women were charged with rape in courts in England and Wales during each of the last three years; and how many were convicted. [84759]

Mr. Boateng: Available data, taken from the Home Office Court Proceedings Database, showing the number of defendants proceeded against the convicted are given in the table.

Number of persons proceeded against at magistrates' courts and convicted at all courts for rape offences, England and Wales, 1995–1997

	1995		*1996*		*1997*	
Offence	*Males*	*Females*	*Males*	*Females*	*Males*	*Females*
Rape of a female						
Proceeded against	1,585	19	1,691	5	1,868	12
Convicted	547	13	551	1	576	—
Rape of a male						
Proceeded against	37	—	60	1	80	1
Convicted	9	—	24	—	42	—

Note:
Generally, attempting, conspiring, inciting, aiding, abetting, causing or permitting a crime is classified under the heading of the crime itself.

Drug Treatment Orders

Mr. Clappison: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many drug treatment orders have been *(a)* made and *(b)* breached in the three pilot areas for the orders; and in how many of the cases where an order has been breached the offender attended the breach hearing. [84891]

Mr. George Howarth: As at 20 May 1999, courts in the pilot areas had made 67 drug treatment and testing orders; and 10 orders had been revoked. A breach hearing cannot be held in the absence of the offender.

Fire Service College

Mr. Shaw: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will make a statement about the future of the Fire Service Training College in Moreton-in-Marsh. [84935]

Mr. Straw: I refer my hon. Friend to the reply I gave to my hon. Friend the Member for Bristol, East (Ms Corston), on 3 March 1999, *Official Report*, column *757*.

Justice and Home Affairs Council

Mr. Maclean: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will publish the latest version of

the agenda for the Justice and Home Affairs Council of 27 and 28 May, prior to the meeting. [85081]

Mr. Straw: Draft agendas for Justice and Home Affairs Councils are provided to Parliament as early as possible before each Council. The current draft agenda for the Council on 27–28 May was sent on 19 May to the European Scrutiny Committee and the Home Affairs Committee, as well as to the European Communities Committee in the House of Lords. I have placed a copy in the Library.

Daniel Morgan

Mr. Livsey: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will make a statement on developments in the investigation of the case of murdered private investigator Daniel Morgan. [85052]

Kate Hoey: The investigation of this case is an operational matter for the Commissioner of the Metropolitan Police. He tells me that the case remains open, and that inquiries are continuing.

Immigration Act 1971

Fiona Mactaggart: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department, pursuant to his answer to the hon. Member for Hertsmere (Mr. Clappison) of 22 April 1999, *Official Report*, column *666*, on the Immigration Act 1971, if the answer included applications made by people who did not have current leave to remain at the time of application; what was the average time taken to decide a non-asylum application made out of time; and how many applications were made *(a)* in time and *(b)* out of time in each year since 1994. [85039]

Mr. Mike O'Brien: The information given in my reply to the hon. Member for Hertsmere (Mr. Clappison) on 22 April 1999, *Official Report*, column *666*, related to all decisions. It is not possible to identify how many of the applications were made by people who did not have current leave to remain at the time of application.

Immigration and Nationality Directorate

Mr. Mullin: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department, pursuant to his answer of 25 March 1999, *Official Report*, column *383*, which tenders for the computerisation of IND reached the final stage of consideration; and if he will make a statement. [84373]

Mr. Mike O'Brien: Two companies were invited to submit Best and Final Offers for this contract. They were Andersen Consulting and Siemens Business Services.

The National Audit Office report on the Immigration and Nationality Directorate Casework Programme concluded that the Directorate's handling of negotiations and the evaluation of bids was thorough. The Directorate became aware at a late stage in the competition that Andersen Consulting's NIRS2 project for the Contributions Agency was running into difficulty, but after consideration concluded that although the NIRS2 situation might have presented a handling problem, it was not so significant as to undermine Andersen Consulting's bid for the Casework Programme.

Of the seven companies listed in the reply I gave to my hon. Friend on 25 March 1999, *Official Report*, column *383*, one did not pre-qualify, three were eliminated at the short-listing stage and one more withdrew by agreement before contract negotiations began.

Stephen Lawrence Inquiry Report

Mr. Garnier: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department, pursuant to his answer to the hon. Member for Eltham (Mr. Efford) of 13 May 1999, *Official Report*, columns *187–88*, on the Macpherson report, if he will publish the report of the leak inquiry with the names of the officials and advisers who had access to the relevant papers omitted. [85054]

Mr. Straw: No. As I informed the House in my reply to the right hon. Member for Sutton Coldfield (Sir N. Fowler) on 8 March 1999, *Official Report*, column *32*, it is not the practice to publish leak inquiry reports.

NORTHERN IRELAND

Human Rights

Mr. McNamara: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland what are the most recent communications she has *(a)* sent to and *(b)* received from the UN special rapporteur with responsibility for human rights and states of emergency. [84782]

Marjorie Mowlam *[holding answer 20 May 1999]:* I refer my hon. Friend to the reply given to him on 20 May 1999, *Official Report* columns *413–14*, by my hon. Friend the Minister of State, Foreign and Commonwealth Office.

Security Incidents

Mr. William Ross: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland (1) if she will list for the week ended Saturday 15 May the number of *(a)* punishment beatings and *(b)* punishment shootings which took place in Northern Ireland, indicating how many in each category were committed by (i) Loyalist and (ii) Republican groups; [85049]

(2) if she will list for the week ended Saturday 15 May the number of violent incidents involving paramilitary groups which took place in Northern Ireland, indicating how many involved (i) Loyalist and (ii) Republican groups. [85048]

Mr. Ingram: The number of security incidents during the period 9–15 May 1999 are as shown.

Security incidents	*Number*
Deaths	0
Shootings	1
Bombings	1

The number of casualties as a result of paramilitary-style attacks during the period are as follows.

	Loyalist	*Republican*
Assaults	4	0
Shootings	0	0
Total	4	0

Note:
Figures may be subject to minor amendment.
The shooting incident cannot as yet be firmly attributed to a grouping.

EDUCATION AND EMPLOYMENT

Schools (Hendon)

Mr. Dismore: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment if he will list the schools in Hendon which have received funding from New Deal for Schools, indicating the work concerned and the amount awarded. [84931]

Mr. Charles Clarke: The information requested is shown in the following table.

New deals for schools funds allocated to schools in Hendon

School name	*New Deal for Schools Phase 1 allocation (£)*	*New Deal for Schools Phase 2 allocation (£)*	*New Deal for Schools Phase 3 allocation (£)*	*Project details*
Broadfields Junior School	3,000	—	—	Improve information and communication technology access
St. Joseph's	20,200	—	—	Refurbish toilets
Broadfields Junior; St. Mary's Junior St. John's Infants	—	—	—	Package to renew boiler systems at 4 schools including Our Lady of Lourdes School which is not situated within the Hendon constituency: the allocation cannot be disaggregated. The total package amounted to £197,581 and was allocated in the second phase of New Deal for Schools
Colindale Junior Mixed and Infant	—	50,000	—	Replacement of 3 structurally unsound timber demountable classrooms
Copthall School	—	642,000	—	Structural repairs to, and rewiring of, 1930s school
Deansbrook Junior School	—	—	1,388,500	New extension and replacement of demountable units

Parliamentary Democracy

Mr. Cox: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment if he will list the documents produced by his Department for distribution to schools in England and Wales, which detail the workings of the British parliamentary system. [84739]

Mr. Charles Clarke: The Department has produced no such documents. The Department's role in the area of educational materials and resources is one of advice and guidance. It remains the responsibility of school governing bodies to decide on the materials and resources they wish to use. My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Education and Employment published proposals on 13 May for consultation as part of the review of the National Curriculum on a framework for citizenship education in schools. This includes knowledge about the working of parliamentary democracy.

NVQs

Mr. Nicholls: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment how many NVQ Level 3 have been de-accredited since 1 September 1998; what is his estimate of the number of small and medium-sized businesses which no longer have their preferred NVQ available to them for modern apprenticeships; and if he will make a statement. [85125]

Mr. Mudie: Since 1 September 1998, 99 level 3 NVQs have exhausted their agreed accreditation spans, and 101 re-accreditation or new accreditations have taken place. Since 1 September 1998, four new Modern Apprenticeship frameworks have been agreed, and ten have been revised. There is no statistical information on the NVQ preferences of each small or medium-sized business, so I cannot give the information requested.

If the hon. Member has particular cases in mind, I would be very happy to investigate them.

Hospitality Sector (Training)

Mr. Peter Ainsworth: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what plans he has to co-ordinate further Government support for training programmes in the hospitality sector. [85294]

Mr. Mudie: Government recognise the Hospitality Training Foundation as the National Training Organisation (NTO) for the hospitality sector. NTOs are independent employer-led sector organisations working strategically with their sectors and with Government on education and training matters.

INTERNATIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Political and Human Rights

Mr. Cox: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development what funding has been given by her Department to develop political and human rights parliamentary discussion groups in Commonwealth countries in each of the last three years. [84745]

Clare Short: We support the strengthening of parliamentary institutions in order to develop political and human rights. In 1997–98 we allocated £280,000 to the Commonwealth Secretariat to develop the awareness of parliamentarians in political and human rights. In 1998–99 so far, we have provided £600,000 in South Africa and £312,000 in Uganda in support of open accountable government and improvement in parliamentary administration.

We are not able to identify what portion of these grants was spent specifically on discussion groups.

CABINET OFFICE

Scottish Parliament

Mr. Gordon Prentice: To ask the Minister for the Cabinet Office what changes he proposes in the modus operandi of the Joint Cabinet Consultative Committee following the establishment of joint working between Labour and the Liberal Democrats in the Scottish Parliament. [84680]

Dr. Jack Cunningham: None.

Joint Consultative Committee

Mr. Gordon Prentice: To ask the Minister for the Cabinet Office, pursuant to his answer of 28 January 1999, *Official Report*, column *316*, on the Joint Consultative Committee, if he will publish the unclassified minutes of the JCC. [84679]

Dr. Jack Cunningham: None of the minutes of the Joint Consultative Committee are unclassified.

Mr. Gordon Prentice: To ask the Minister for the Cabinet Office if he will list the membership of the Joint Cabinet Consultative Committee. [84982]

Dr. Jack Cunningham: I refer my hon. Friend to the answer my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister gave to my hon. Friend the Member for Midlothian (Mr. Clarke) on 21 October 1998, *Official Report*, columns 1123–35.

Biotechnology Presentation Group

Mr. Baker: To ask the Minister for the Cabinet Office (1) if he will set out the terms of reference of the Biotechnology Presentation Group; [85284]

(2) if he will set out the objects of the central co-ordinated rebuttals strategy in respect of genetic modification; [85279]

(3) on what date he decided to establish the Biotechnology Presentation Group; [85282]

(4) on what dates the Biotechnology Presentation Group has met; and who was present on each occasion. [85283]

Dr. Jack Cunningham: The Government agree with the Science and Technology Select Committee that we need an informed, balanced debate on biotechnology. As Ministers, we meet regularly to discuss how we can promote such a debate.

Genetic Modification

Mr. Baker: To ask the Minister for the Cabinet Office if he has contacted the National Consumer Council to seek its endorsement of the Government's approach to genetic modification; and if he will make a statement. [85280]

Dr. Jack Cunningham: I have spoken to the National Consumers Council and to other interested organisations to explain to them the measures which I announced to the House on 21 May 1999.

Mr. Baker: To ask the Minister for the Cabinet Office for what purposes he proposes to make alterations prior to publication to the report of the Chief Medical Officer and Chief Scientific Adviser on genetic modification. [85281]

Dr. Jack Cunningham: The joint paper by the Chief Medical Officer and the Chief Scientific Adviser on genetically modified foods and public health was published on Friday 21 May 1999. The authors revised the paper to ensure that it was intelligible to the lay reader and included recommendations for action.

AGRICULTURE, FISHERIES AND FOOD

Agriculture Council

Mr. Rammell: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what was the outcome of the Agriculture Council held in Brussels on 17 to 18 May; and if he will make a statement. [85239]

Mr. Nick Brown: I represented the United Kingdom at a meeting of the EU Agriculture Council in Brussels on 17 May 1999.

The Council formally adopted all the legal instruments giving effect to the Agenda 2000 reforms of the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) as agreed by EU Heads of Government in Berlin in late March. Now that this important stage has been reached, work can begin on the detailed texts which will put the CAP reform measures into operation with effect from next year.

The Council discussed the present state of the EU pigmeat market. The Council requested experts to examine the issues affecting the market further at the level of the management committee, a position I supported on behalf of the United Kingdom.

Agriculture Commissioner Fischler informed the Council of the current position with regard to WTO rulings on bananas and growth hormones in beef. On the former, I stressed the need for a WTO-compatible outcome which also had regard for the interests of the vulnerable Caribbean ACP producers. On the latter, I urged the Commission to take a measured approach with the US authorities, and to conduct a full exchange of information between the two sides on the underlying science.

On veterinary medicines, the Council supported a resolution calling for action on the problems of antibiotic resistance in veterinary and human medicine. The resolution will be taken forward to the EU Health Council in June for adoption. The Council adopted a resolution setting out measures designed to avoid the loss of

veterinary medicinal products when the deadline for setting maximum residue limits in foodstuffs of animal origin expires at the end of December 1999.

Bovine Somatotropin

Mr. Drew: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what recent discussions he has had with EU partners on the subject of bovine somatotropin in milk. [85058]

Mr. Rooker: There have as yet been no bilateral discussions but the issue was raised by Germany at the May meeting of the Agriculture Council. The Commission will submit a proposal before the expiry of the moratorium at the end of the year for discussion by the Agriculture Council. Meanwhile, we have asked the Veterinary Products Committee to report on the latest scientific evidence on human and animal safety in order to inform the Government's position on the future of the moratorium.

Food Advisory Groups

Mr. Drew: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what plans the Government have to change the membership of food advisory groups; and when they expect these changes to take effect from. [85059]

Mr. Rooker: The Government have no plans at the present time to change the membership structure of its food advisory groups.

Mr. Drew: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what plans the Government have to ensure that consumer interests are represented on food advisory groups. [85060]

Mr. Rooker: All food advisory groups reporting to the Government include members with consumer interest backgrounds. These members also regularly meet together with others with consumer interests in the Consumer Panel which I chair.

Upland Grazing Areas (Radioactive Contamination)

Mr. Gordon Prentice: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what assessment he has made of when all upland grazing areas in the United Kingdom will be free of contamination from the fall-out from Chernobyl. [84894]

Mr. Rooker: Regular assessments are made of radiocaesium levels in sheep in affected areas to determine the prospects for removing controls and further reducing the areas subject to restrictions.

Whilst generally declining, radiocaesium from the Chernobyl accident is still present in some upland areas in the United Kingdom. The rate of decline is dependent on the complex interaction between such factors as soil type, vegetation, weather, drainage and grazing preference. Consequently it is not possible to specify a time at which all these areas will be free of Chernobyl contamination.

Foot and Mouth Disease

Mr. Cox: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food how many reported cases of foot and mouth disease there have been in the UK in each of the last five years. [84760]

Mr. Rooker: There have been no cases of foot and mouth disease in the UK in the last five years. The number of suspected cases of foot and mouth disease in farm livestock investigated in each of the last five years is as follows:

Year	*Number of suspected cases*
1994	26
1995	18
1996	13
1997	12
1998	8
1999 (to date)	Nil
Total	77

On each occasion the possibility of foot and mouth disease was ruled out.

Media Relations

Mr. Baker: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food how many *(a)* civil servants and *(b)* special advisers involved in media relations were employed within his Department at 1 May (i) 1997, (ii) 1998 and (iii) 1999. [84197]

Mr. Morley *[holding answer 18 May 1999]:* Detailed information on the numbers of permanent civil servants employed in Departmental Press Offices during the financial years 1997–98 and 1998–99 was provided in a memorandum dated 16 June 1998 to the Select Committee on Public Administration and published in its report on The Government Information and Communication Service (HC 770) in July 1998. A copy is in the Library of the House.

There were 7 Civil Servants in my Department involved in Media relations as at 1 May 1999. Special Advisers in my Department have ad hoc contact with the media but none are specifically employed in media relations.

Quarantine

Dr. Tonge: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food when he plans to bring into force the new legislation concerning the control of quarantine of pets. [84571]

Mr. Rooker: On 26 March 1999, my right hon. Friend announced that the Government's objective is to bring new arrangements into operation throughout the United Kingdom by April 2001. We also plan to launch a pilot scheme or pilot schemes by April 2000.

CAP Reform

Miss McIntosh: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what representations he has received on the Berlin Summit agreement for reform of the Common Agricultural Policy relating to beet and cereals. [84552]

Mr. Rooker: A range of representations have been received concerning the recent CAP reform in the cereals sector. Consultations will be held shortly on implementation of the discretionary elements of the arable reform. The Berlin Summit agreement made no reference to sugar beet, as the arrangements in this sector will be reviewed next year. Representations on sugar are already being made. The Government believe that this sector too requires reform and we will be consulting shortly on what shape that reform should take.

Farming (Women)

Miss McIntosh: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what representations he has received on the role of women in farming. [84554]

Mr. Rooker: Since May 1997 we have had some inquiries about the role of women in farming. These dealt with a wide variety of issues including sources of EU funding to help women enter agriculture, levels of remuneration, taxation and succession. Women in farming are treated strictly in accordance with the principles of equal treatment which are firmly established in UK law.

Slaughtering Industry

Mr. Tyler: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food on what basis he decided to set five working days as the consultation period on the impact of proposed charges on the slaughtering industry. [84076]

Mr. Rooker *[holding answer 14 May 1999]:* I recognise that we have allowed only a short period for responses to the consultation document issued by my Department. However, as my right hon. Friend announced to the House on 21 April 1999, *Official Report*, columns 982–88, we are anxious that the review be completed quickly. We can then make decisions on the outstanding charging issues, and remove some of the current uncertainty from the industry by providing a framework in which businesses can make commercial decisions about their future development. We will, of course, accept late responses but cannot guarantee that detailed points received after the deadline will be able to be fully taken into account.

Mr. Tyler: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what criteria have been used to select organisations consulted by his Ministry in studying the impact of proposed charges on the slaughtering industry. [84075]

Mr. Rooker *[holding answer 14 May 1999]:* As my right hon. Friend announced to the House on 21 April 1999, *Official Report*, columns 982–88, this study involves a close examination of the dynamics of the slaughtering sector and of the impact of charges on abattoirs and on producers. Selection of the organisations to be consulted therefore reflected this specific remit and concentrated on organisations, such as those represented on the MHS Industry Forum, who would be able to comment on the direct economic impact of charges on individual businesses. A second mailing to those who had responded to our earlier consultation on charges for specified risk material enforcement, was carried out on 10 May.

To provide an opportunity to any others who may wish to comment, the consultation letter has been placed on the Ministry's Internet site, and its availability announced by MAFF News Release. As a result, more copies have been issued to organisations and individuals who were not on the original lists.

Fishing Industry

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what assessment he has made of the impact on employment of the policy of ensuring an economic link between quota hoppers and populations dependent on fisheries and related industries. [84529]

Mr. Morley: It is too early to make such an assessment, as under the arrangements announced in July 1998 vessel owners will have until July 2000 to let us know which of the available options they intend to use to demonstrate an economic link. One of those options requires 50 per cent. of the crew to be normally resident in a UK coastal area and would, if used, have a direct impact upon employment opportunities for British fishermen. Other options include either the landing of fish at UK ports or the purchase of goods and services here, either of which may impact indirectly upon onshore employment opportunities. Some early indications suggest an increase in landings at UK fishing ports and the offer of fish quota for the use of the inshore sector. These measures should have beneficial effects on employment in fisheries related sectors.

Environmental Disputes

Mrs. Curtis-Thomas: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what evaluation his Department has undertaken of methods of resolving disputes relating to environmental matters. [83317]

Mr. Morley *[holding answer 5 May 1999]:* None.

Environmentally Sensitive Areas

Mr. Todd: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food when he plans to publish the performance indicators for the environmentally sensitive areas in England. [83481]

Mr. Morley: I am today publishing for consultation objectives, indicators and targets for the 16 Stage I-III Environmentally Sensitive Areas in England. A copy of the papers has been placed in the Library of the House. The Ministry's policy is to focus uptake under the scheme on the biodiversity, landscape and historical and archaeological priorities in each ESA. In future, where applications do not offer value for public money, the Ministry will exercise its discretion not to accept them into the scheme.

Ministerial Meetings (US)

Mr. Matthew Taylor: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food how many times Ministers in his Department met their counterparts in the US administration between 1 January 1998 and 1 June 1998, indicating the dates and locations of each meeting, the Ministers involved and the name of the US counterpart. [81083]

Mr. Nick Brown: Ministers in my Department met their counterparts in the US Administration twice between 1 January and 1 June 1998. My noble Friend the Parliamentary Secretary met Mr. Gus Schumacher, the US Under-Secretary for Trade, in London on 25 February 1998 and my right hon. Friend the Member for Copeland (Dr. Cunningham) met Mr. Dan Glickman the US Agriculture Secretary and Gus Schumacher the US Under-Secretary for Trade in Paris on 6 March 1998.

SOCIAL SECURITY

Disability Living Allowance

5. **Mr. Miller:** To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what training will be provided for those people reviewing disability living allowance awards under the new periodic review process. [83995]

Mr. Bayley: We are committed to ensuring that the new periodic inquiry process is delivered sensitively and fairly. In consultation with disability organisations, we have developed a comprehensive training package for all staff involved in the new process. The training covers impairment awareness and the particular needs of individual groups and is being delivered with the assistance of Pauline Thompson of the Disablement Income Group.

22. **Mr. Amess:** To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what recent representations she has received on disability living allowance. [84012]

Mr. Bayley: We routinely receive, and welcome, representations about benefits for disabled people, including disability living allowance.

Mr. Corbett: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security (1) what is the backlog at the Disability Living Allowance Unit concerning cases where the Disability Appeal Tribunal has upheld an appeal against *(a)* refusal of disability living allowance, *(b)* the rate of mobility component and *(c)* the rate of care component; what the figures were (i) six and (ii) 12 months ago; and what steps are being taken to deliver a more efficient service to claimants; [84880]

(2) when he expects to pay Mr. Edward Turner (Ref. ZM897757D) the disability living allowance with lower rate mobility component and middle rate care component he was awarded by the Disability Appeal Tribunal on 26 February; and if he will make a statement on the reasons for the delay in payment. [84879]

Mr. Bayley: The administration of Disability Living Allowance is a matter for the Chief Executive of the Benefits Agency, Peter Mathison. I have asked him to write to my hon. Friend.

Letter from Alexis Cleveland to Mr. Robin Corbett, dated 20 May 1999:

The Secretary of State for Social Security has asked Peter Mathison to reply to your recent Parliamentary Questions asking about the backlog of cases at the Disability Living Allowance Unit requiring action following an appeal, what steps are being taken to deliver a more efficient service, and when Mr. Edward Turner is expected to receive payment following the decision of the appeal tribunal hearing of 26th February 1999. As Mr. Mathison is away on leave, I am replying.

At 30th November 1998 there were 706 Disability Appeal Tribunal decisions outstanding and 695 at 31st April 1999. These figures encompass all decisions reached, including award decisions, disallowance decisions, and decisions where existing entitlement remains unchanged. It has not been possible to break down the figures into the type of decision made or the specific Disability Living Allowance component. Figures from an earlier date are not available.

Under the Government's programme of welfare reform, a range of measures is being introduced to improve all aspects of claiming Disability Living Allowance. These include the Decision Making and Appeals initiative which will introduce new adjudication procedures to enable disputed decisions to be reconsidered without having to go to appeal. It is anticipated that this will result in fewer numbers of appeal cases.

I can confirm that instructions were issued on 18th May 1999 for all arrears of benefit, and future monthly payments, to be made to Mr. Turner's bank account.

Implementation of a Disability Appeal Tribunal decision may be suspended if there is reason to believe that the decision has been made in error of law and that an appeal to the Commissioner may be appropriate. I regret that implementation of the Appeal Tribunal's decision was suspended incorrectly in this case and I apologise for the delay that has occurred.

I hope you find this reply helpful.

Prescription Charges

16. **Mr. David Heath:** To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what recent discussions he has had with Ministers from the Department of Health on the documentation required by claimants seeking exemption or partial exemption from prescription charges. [84006]

Angela Eagle: None. Discussions between officials from both Departments took place in February.

All Work Test

17. **Mr. Bill O'Brien:** To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what plans he has to change the all work test application forms; and if he will make a statement. [84007]

Mr. Bayley: The Benefits Agency regularly reviews the content of forms and leaflets to ensure they meet their purpose and that they are user friendly for customers. There are currently no plans to revise the questionnaire, which claimants complete for the all work test. Some improvements to the form were made in 1997 to make it easier for claimants to complete and to help them provide full information about the effects of their medical condition.

36. **Mr. Gapes:** To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security if he will make a statement on plans to change the all work test. [84029]

Mr. Bayley: The Welfare Reform and Pensions Bill contains provisions to replace the all work test with the Personal Capability Assessment. The Personal Capability Assessment will continue to determine, in the same way as now, whether the person meets the threshold of incapacity for entitlement to incapacity benefits. That threshold will not change but the Personal Capability Assessment will also be able to provide additional constructive information about what a person can do, despite their medical condition or disability. This additional information will help personal advisers give their clients the support they need to move back to work.

Housing Benefit

18. **Mr. Wilkinson:** To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what representations he has received on the reform of housing benefit. [84008]

Angela Eagle: We set up the Housing Benefit Simplification and Improvement Project with local authority representatives last autumn to review the existing rules; administration; and service delivery of Housing Benefit. We have received written and oral representations from a number of professional, voluntary and charitable organisations with an interest in Housing Benefit.

31. **Mr. Campbell-Savours:** To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what progress has been made on the review of housing benefit. [84023]

Angela Eagle: We have worked with local authorities to consider ways of simplifying and improving the current system of Housing Benefit. Details of the proposals are being considered and will be announced in due course.

Mr. Field: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what proportion of local authorities have agreements in place with the Post Office to prevent redirection of housing benefit girocheques. [85227]

Angela Eagle: The national agreement with the Post Office not to redirect Social Security related local authority post came into operation on 1 February 1999. To date 56 local authorities are operating the do not redirect service.

Appeals Procedures

19. **Mr. Watts:** To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what steps his Department is taking to improve social security appeals procedures. [84009]

Mr. Darling: We have made clear our intentions to modernise the welfare state. As part of our plans for improving the Social Security system we are introducing important changes to the decision making and appeals processes. On 22 March this House debated and approved the necessary regulations. The changes will be implemented during the latter half of this year, starting with Child Support on 1 June. The changes aim to help get decisions right first time, resolve disputes at an early stage and deal with appeals more efficiently and quickly.

European Social Model

20. **Mr. Ben Chapman:** To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security if he will make a statement on his plans for reforming the European Social Model. [84010]

Angela Eagle: There is no single European Social Model, since member states have developed social provision in different ways, reflecting their own circumstances and traditions. But we want to see social protection systems across Europe modernised by national governments in line with changing needs and circumstances.

Retirement

23. **Mr. Sheerman:** To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what steps his Department is taking to improve the quality of information available to individuals on making adequate provision for retirement. [84013]

Mr. Timms: The Pensions Green Paper published last December set out our proposals for improving the quality of information on pensions for individuals, both in general and in the information people are given about their own pension position. We are taking action in co-operation with employers and the pensions industry to provide both integrated pension forecasts and fuller and better information on projected state and private pension rights.

Occupational Pensions

24. **Ms Stuart:** To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what steps he is taking to increase members' confidence in their occupational pensions. [84015]

Mr. Timms: The Pensions Green Paper we published last December proposed measures to strengthen occupational pension schemes and to increase members' confidence in them. The general direction of the reforms has been widely welcomed. We are working closely with the pensions industry and others in taking the detailed proposals forward.

Stakeholder Pensions

25. **Mr. Jim Cunningham:** To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what assessment he has made of the potential cost benefits to those working in industries with high labour turnover rates of using the new stakeholder pension. [84016]

Mr. Timms: Our proposals for stakeholder pension schemes establish a framework which will ensure that schemes reflect the needs of those who change jobs frequently. Members will be able to ensure that members can stop and restart contributions and, if necessary, transfer their funds to another scheme, without penalty.

Mr. Webb: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what rules will govern the use of funds which have been transferred into a stakeholder pension from a personal pension, with particular reference to (i) the use of the fund for a tax-free lump sum and (ii) the nature of the annuity which may be bought with the fund. [84548]

Mr. Timms: The rules applying to transfers into stakeholder pension schemes are currently being considered in the light of responses to the Green Paper "Partnership in Pensions".

Benefit Payment Delays

26. **Mr. Simon Hughes:** To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what remedies are available to people whose *(a)* social security benefit and *(b)* child support payments are delayed through no fault of the claimant or applicant. [84017]

Angela Eagle: Under the Department's standing compensation scheme, the terms of which have been agreed between the Department and the Ombudsman, compensation may be considered where official error or unreasonable delay have led to an actual financial loss.

Where benefit or child support payments are unreasonably delayed (delay must exceed a set period which depends on the benefit concerned) due to official error a special payment can be considered, in recognition of the fact that the customer has lost the use of the sum owed. In such cases the compensatory payment is

calculated in the form of interest on the arrears of benefit when they are paid. A copy of the Department's guide to special payments, known as the "Financial Redress for Maladministration", is held in the House of Commons Library.

In addition, if a parent with care of a child is receiving Income Support or income based Jobseeker's Allowance (JSA), and the non-resident parent does not pay the child support to the parent with care, Income Support or JSA can be paid in its place pending the recovery of the money from the non-resident parent.

As a last resort, if a customer is without funds to cover the period between a claim for benefit and the first payment that is due, crisis loans are available to prevent risk to the health or safety of the applicant and his family.

Benefit Fraud

27. **Mr. Stringer:** To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what targets he has set for reducing fraud in the benefits system. [84018]

Mr. Timms: For the first time we have set a measurable target for reducing fraud and error. Our target is to reduce the level of fraud and error in Income Support and Jobseeker's Allowance, two of the most vulnerable benefits, by 30 per cent., by 2007, with at least a 10 per cent. reduction by March 2002.

Lone Parents

28. **Mr. Swayne:** To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security if he will set targets for the numbers of lone parents who leave income support as a consequence of the New Deal for Lone Parents. [84020]

Angela Eagle: In addition to the 12,500 lone parents who have already found jobs as a result of the New Deal for Lone Parents, we have set the Employment Service a target for 1999–2000—to place a further 15,000 lone parents into work.

Child Support Agency

29. **Mr. Syms:** To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what the publication date is for the draft legislation for the reform of the Child Support Agency. [84021]

Angela Eagle: Final decisions on the shape of the reformed scheme and the associated legislative process will be announced shortly.

32. **Mrs. Spelman:** To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what representations he has had in response to the Green Paper on the Child Support Agency. [84024]

Angela Eagle: We have received 1,564 written responses to the Green Paper. My noble Friend the Baroness Hollis of Heigham has also held meetings with more than 40 organisations, academics and other groups with an interest in child support.

Motability Cars

30. **Mr. Quinn:** To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security if he will make a statement about the value for money provided by Motability cars. [84022]

Mr. Bayley: The Motability contract hire scheme, which covers about 95 per cent. of the vehicles provided, represents substantial value for money for disabled people. Lease costs cover maintenance, comprehensive insurance and roadside assistance. Over 25 per cent. of the over 300 model variants supplied under the scheme by 23 manufacturers are available for less than the weekly higher rate mobility component of Disability Living Allowance of £37 week, and the cheapest vehicle available under the scheme can now be had for less than £24 per week.

Pensions Green Paper

33. **Mr. Blizzard:** To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what assessment he has made of the responses to the pensions Green Paper. [84025]

Mr. Timms: I refer my hon. Friend to the answer given to my hon. Friend the Member for Harwich (Mr. Henderson) on 17 May 1999, *Official Report*, column *252*.

Means-tested Benefits

34. **Mr. Blunt:** To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what studies his Department has carried out into the disincentives to save created by means-tested benefits. [84026]

Angela Eagle: All those who can save, particularly for their retirement, have a responsibility to do so. In our Welfare Reform and Pensions Bill, we are taking steps to ensure that people of working age are encouraged to save so that they can retire on incomes above anything benefits could ever be expected to provide.

New Technology

35. **Helen Jackson:** To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security if he will make a statement on improvements proposed through the introduction of new technology in his Department. [84027]

Angela Eagle: As part of our commitment to modernise the Welfare Service the Department is seeking to transform the way Social Security is delivered. We aim to provide a system which is focused on work for those who can and security for those who cannot, providing a customer focused and integrated service which operates across organisational boundaries to improve quality and integrity.

New Information Technology (IT) is at the core of these modernisation plans. The key elements of our strategy for IT are a corporate data set that holds the necessary information on citizens and a set of front-line systems which allow staff to access that information to deliver the full range of welfare services.

Through this IT strategy the Department will meet the longer term objectives of designing services around people; achieving leverage against fraud and abuse; integrating and improving the accuracy and efficiency of operations and of accounting across the Department; and creating a more joined-up welfare service for the public spanning other Government Departments, local authorities and the voluntary sector.

Carers

37. **Mr. Goggins:** To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what progress he is making on the introduction of a citizenship pension for carers. [84030]

Mr. Timms: In December 1998, the Government published a Green Paper, "A new contract for welfare: Partnership in Pensions". This included proposals to give carers the opportunity to build up a second pension, by awarding them flat rate credits to the new State Second Pension scheme. The proposals cover recipients of Invalid Care Allowance, carers of people receiving Attendance Allowance or Disability Living Allowance who qualify for Home Responsibilities Protection and Child Benefit recipients where the youngest child is aged five or under.

The consultation period for the Green Paper ended on 31 March 1999. Since then we have been considering the responses received and will provide further details in due course.

Disabled People (Incomes)

Mrs. Fyfe: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what is the intended minimum weekly income for *(a)* a single adult who is disabled and unable to work and *(b)* a single adult who is considered partially disabled but who is unable to find work. [83999]

Mr. Bayley: Income Support (and income based Jobseeker's Allowance) is available to assist disabled adults who have a low income. The overall weekly amount of benefit payable will depend on the individual's circumstances, such as their age, their savings, income, the severity of their disability and so on. Our proposals for a new Disability Income Guarantee together with measures in the Welfare Reform and Pensions Bill will provide more help for disabled adults and children who need help most.

Widows (SERPS)

Mr. Winnick: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security if he will make a statement on the amount which widows are due to receive under SERPS from 2000. [84019]

Mr. Timms: Legislation introduced by the previous Government in 1986 provides for widows to receive 50 per cent. of their late husbands' SERPS entitlement from April 2000. We will make an announcement in due course.

Customer Service

Mr. Burns: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what procedures are followed to ensure the delivery of a high-quality service in his Department's offices in Essex. [85252]

Angela Eagle: Working with the Employment Services, Child Support Agency, Local Authorities and other customer representative groups, is a key element of the Benefit Agency's (BA) current modernisation programme. The standards of customer service the BA sets out to achieve is published in the BA Customer Charter. This, together with other internal agency targets, provide the clear measurable standards that BA offices in Essex are expected to provide in delivering a timely, effective and informative service to customers.

The Child Support Agency has many improvements underway, planned specifically at improving customer service and efficiency. Greater use of the telephone is being made to improve the way information is collected. Opening hours have been extended to offer a more accessible service at evenings and weekends—this further improves service by being able to contact parents at times which suit them. Dedicated staff offer face-to-face interviews and this service is being extended during 1999–2000. The Agency is convinced that this will mean the more effective progression of cases and a better service.

Payment Books

Mr. Burns: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what proportion of his Department's payment books issued in Essex in the last 12 months were produced *(a)* manually and *(b)* by computer. [85253]

Angela Eagle: The information is not available in the format requested. Such information as is available shows that during 1998–99 a total of 2,790,657 computer order books were issued in the East London and Anglia Area. In 1998–99 3,282 manual order books were issued in Essex.

Complaints

Mr. Burns: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security how many complaints were received in the last 12 months by his Department's offices in Essex relating to *(a)* delays in payment book issue and *(b)* breaches of confidentiality. [85256]

Angela Eagle: In the period 1 April 1998 to 21 May 1999, a total of 23 written complaints were received about the late issue of payment books. A further 3 complaints related to breaches of confidentiality.

Demographic Charges

Mr. John M. Taylor: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what was the ratio of persons working and paying income tax to persons in receipt of state Retirement Pension in (i) 1978–79, (ii) 1988–89 and (iii) 1998–99. [85286]

Mr. Timms: The information is in the table.

Estimates of the ratio of the numbers of persons working and paying tax income to the number of persons in receipt of Retirement Pension

Year	*Number of taxpayers*	*Recipients of Retirement Pension*	*Ratio*
1978–79	25,900	8,600	3:1
1988–89	25,200	9,300	2.7:1
1998–99	26,100	10,000	2.6:1

Notes:

1. All figures are rounded to the nearest hundred and are in thousands. Estimates for the numbers of taxpayers are from "Inland Revenue Statistics" 1998. Figures for Retirement Pension are for those resident in Great Britain.

2. The ratios of numbers of taxpayers to recipients of retirement pension are rounded to the nearest 0.1.

3. For Retirement Pension, the figures for 1978–79 and 1988–89 do not include those who are in receipt of graduated retirement benefit. The numbers of taxpayers counts husbands and wives separately.

Information Technology

Mr. Burns: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security (1) what action he is taking to improve IT provision in his Department's offices in Essex; [85255]

(2) what assessment he has made of the reliability of IT systems in his Department's offices in Essex; [85257]

(3) if the computer system in his Department's office in Chelmsford is compatible with that in his Department's office in Southend; [85254]

(4) if his Department's offices in Essex are linked via a Wide Area computer network. [85258]

Angela Eagle: The Department has an agreed strategy for improving its Information Technology (IT) services throughout the Department in support of its modernisation programme. This includes providing improved quality and consistent data from mainframe systems as well as improved IT tools in the office and on the desktop.

The agreement of reliability is contained within a number of Service Level Agreements (SLAs) between the Benefits Agency and Information Technology Services Agency. These SLAs also form the basis of contractual agreements between the Department and its private sector service providers.

The Department also maintains and supports a common infrastructure providing a system of computerised benefits across all Benefit Agency offices including Chelmsford and Southend and these items are compatible. Local Districts have some freedom to implement local desktop solutions, typically work management and administrative systems, to complement their main IT systems for benefit delivery.

The Department's offices in Essex are linked via a Wide Area computer network.

Minimum Income Guarantee

Mr. Boswell: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security if he will make a statement on the minimum pension guarantee. [84028]

Mr. Timms: The Minimum Income Guarantee, delivered through Income Support, provides an income threshold below which most pensioners with no savings, or only a small amount saved, should not fall.

The increase in the Income Support rates for pensioners this April represents an increase above the normal prices-linked uprating, of £160 over the year for a single pensioner. Our undertaking to increase the Minimum Income Guarantee in line with earnings next April further underlines our intention that the least well-off pensioners should share in rising national prosperity.

Mr. Paul Marsden: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security if he will estimate how many pensioners in Shrewsbury and Atcham will benefit from the introduction of the Minimum Income Guarantee; and if he will make a statement. [84866]

Mr. Timms: We estimate that around 2,500 pensioners were in receipt of Income Support in the constituency of Shrewsbury and Atcham in November 1998, the latest date for which this data are available. We are unable to forecast with any reliability how many will be in receipt from April this year in the same area, because the sample size on which the estimates are based is too small. However, we estimate that nationally, an additional 65,000 pensioners will become eligible for the Minimum Income Guarantee, through Income Support, as a result of the above-inflation increases this year, and a further 20,000 next year as a result of uprating the Guarantee in line with earnings.

Notes:

1. "Pensioners" refers to pensioner benefit units, which are single people aged 60 or over or couples where one or partners is 60 or over.

2. Figures exclude cases in residential care and nursing homes.

3. The estimate of 2,500 cases is rounded to the nearest 100 cases, and is subject to a degree of sampling error due to the small numbers involved.

4. The Parliamentary constituency data are based on constituency boundaries as of 1 May 1999.

Source:

1. Income Support Quarterly Statistical Enquiry November 1998.

2. Family Resources Survey 1996–97.

Pensioner Incomes

Mr. Webb: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security if he will estimate the proportion of single pensioners aged 80 years or above who are currently in receipt of income support; and if he will provide corresponding estimates for *(a)* 1994, *(b)* 1989, *(c)* 1984, *(d)* 1979, *(e)* 1974 and *(f)* 1969. [84758]

Mr. Timms: Information is not available in the format requested. Such information as is available is in the table.

Single supplementary benefit/income support pensioners aged 80 and over 1974 to 1998

Year	*Total claimants*	*Proportion of population Percentage*
1974	335,000	25.4
1979	351,000	24.4
1984	434,000	25.4
1989	407,000	20.1
1994	531,000	23.4
1998	617,000	26.7

Notes:

1. Pensioner refers to single claimants only, aged 80 and over.

2. Figures are rounded to the nearest thousand cases, percentages to one decimal place and are subject to a degree of sampling error.

3. Income Support replaced Supplementary Benefit in April 1988.

4. Numbers are given at a point in time. For 1974 and 1979 the month was November. For 1984 the month was December, and from 1989–1998 the month was May.

5. Population figures are based on total population (regardless of marital status) aged 80 years and over.

6. Proportion of population percentages have been calculated using the relevant year of mid-term population estimates, apart from 1998 when mid-term 1997 population estimates were used.

7. Sample sizes: 1974: Supplementary Pension cases 1 in 160; 1979: Supplementary Pension cases 1 in 200; 1984: Supplementary Pension cases 1 in 200 ; 1989: 1 in 100; 1994 to date: 1 in 20.

Sources:

1. Supplementary Benefit/Income Support Annual Statistical Enquiries, 1974 -1994.

2. Income Support Quarterly Statistical Enquiry, November 1998.

3. Office National Statistics population estimates mid-1974 to mid-1997.

Mr. Webb: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security how many individuals received an age addition to the basic state pension *(a)* in the year in which it was introduced, *(b)* at five year intervals thereafter and *(c)* in the latest year for which figures are available. [84757]

Mr. Timms: The information is in the table.

Number of people in receipt of the basic state retirement pension and an age addition payment (for those aged 80 and over) as at the end of each month

Million

Inquiry date	*Number of people*
December 1971	1.2
November 1976	1.4
November 1981	1.6
September 1986	1.9
September 1991	2.2
September 1996	2.4
January 1999	2.4

Note:

Figures have been rounded to the nearest hundred thousand.

Sources:

1. December 1971 and November 1976: Figures from Social Security Statistics based on a 10 per cent. sample excluding clerical cases.
2. November 1981-September 1991: 10 per cent. sample of Central Pensions Branch system.
3. September 1996 and January 1999: 5 per cent. sample of Pensions Strategy Computer System.

Sheltered Housing

Dr. Cable: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what representations his Department has received from social landlords and independent care providers on the Government's proposals for funding sheltered housing under new housing benefit arrangements. [84832]

Angela Eagle: In response to the publication of the consultation document "Supporting People: A new policy and funding framework for support services" on 10 December, we received a total of 128 representations about our proposal for including sheltered housing in the new Supporting People funding arrangements. Sixty-five of those representations were from Registered Social Landlords and independent care providers, and 31 from local authorities.

Responses from providers of sheltered housing welcomed the integration of support services for older people, as well as the fact that access to support funding would no longer be tied to type of tenure. The main concern expressed related to the practicalities of implementing the new funding regime.

We decided to include sheltered housing in the long-term proposals because our aim is to improve the integration of supported and sheltered housing within local strategies for housing and community care. Working alongside existing Government programmes, the new Supporting People funding regime will give the provision of support services, such as those provided by wardens in sheltered accommodation, the priority it deserves. Supporting People will bring long-term stability to the sector by placing for the first time the funding of support services on a secure, sustainable and legal footing.

We recognise the importance of getting the practical details right. That is why we are committed to working with interested parties to ensure that the new system delivers on its objectives and becomes an effective and workable reality.

We hope to publish the analysis of responses to the consultation paper shortly.

TREASURY

Anti-smuggling Equipment

Mr. Maude: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if he will make a statement on current guidance for the use of bulk X-ray equipment by Her Majesty's Customs and Excise to combat smuggling. [85107]

Dawn Primarolo: Her Majesty's Customs and Excise do not presently use bulk X-ray equipment.

If such equipment becomes available for Customs, guidance for its use will be drawn up by operational managers in consultation with the Department's technical and Radiation Protection advisers.

Tobacco Sales

Mr. Maude: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what is his policy on the marking of tobacco products for sale in the United Kingdom. [85106]

Dawn Primarolo: The marking of tobacco products for fiscal purposes is not currently required in the United Kingdom. The report of the Alcohol and Tobacco Fraud Review, published in July 1998, recommended that marking should be considered. While the form of marking proposed by that Review has proved impractical for legal reasons, Customs and Excise is currently reviewing other marking options.

Taxation

Mr. Gibb: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer, pursuant to his answer of 16 April 1999, *Official Report*, columns *387–90*, on taxation, if he will publish the figures on the basis of the assumptions for household spending and council tax payment which were used in the answer to the right hon. Member for Edinburgh, Central (Mr. Darling) of 11 December 1996, *Official Report*, columns *190–202*. [81712]

Dawn Primarolo: Estimating the impact of indirect taxes on the basis of average assumptions about household spending is imprecise as spending patterns vary widely between households with the same composition and income, with the consumption of the majority of goods and services far from universal. For example, only around one third of adults are smokers. This can be contrasted with direct taxes and benefits where at specified earnings and for particular household types there is a known benefit entitlement or tax liability.

VAT

Mr. Maude: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if he will state the reasons for not applying the VAT (Sport, Sports Competitions and Physical Education) Order 1999 from 1 April; and when he expects to bring it into force. [85110]

Dawn Primarolo: Following discussion of the proposed legislation with sports representative bodies, HM Customs and Excise are making changes to the draft Order. A further announcement will be made as soon as possible.

Mr. Maude: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer how many representations he has received regarding the Online VAT Return. [85099]

Dawn Primarolo: This year's Finance Bill allows Customs and Excise to provide new electronic services including VAT returns on the internet.

In response to an announcement in the VAT Notes, issued to all VAT registered businesses, over 300 representations have been received, 99 per cent. of which not only welcomed this initiative but also stated a preference for an internet-based service.

No formal consultation exercise is planned. Some businesses and individual taxpayers will wish to send tax information on paper and we will continue to offer this option.

Mr. Maude: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what assessment he has made of the implications for the VAT (Input Tax) Order 1992 of the judgment of the European Court against the Republic of Italy (Case C-45/95). [85098]

Dawn Primarolo: This European Court judgment does not directly affect the VAT (Input Tax) Order 1992, as the effect of the judgment is to introduce new exemptions from VAT. However, implementing these exemptions will involve some consequential changes to the Order. Details of these, and of other proposed related changes, are set out in a Technical Note issued by HM Customs and Excise on 21 April 1999, a copy of which has been placed in the House of Commons Library.

Mr. Maude: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what external legal advice he has received regarding the VAT treatment of the supply of an interest in land and buildings following the judgment of the European Court against the Republic of Italy (Case C-45/95); and if he will make a statement. [85097]

Dawn Primarolo: Customs have met with Treasury Counsel over this issue and they are awaiting his written opinion. Most property transactions are, however, already exempt from VAT.

Mr. Maude: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if he will make a statement on the VAT liability in respect of *(a)* room hire, *(b)* crèche facilities and *(c)* catering franchises contracted out by local authorities. [85109]

Dawn Primarolo: The VAT liability of supplies made by local authorities is no different from that applying to other suppliers. VAT charged on supplies made to local authorities can normally be reclaimed from Customs and Excise.

Mr. Maude: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what plans he has to continue reviewing the VAT registration threshold; and if he will make a statement. [85108]

Dawn Primarolo: Following the recent Budget, I asked Customs to work further with business to explore whether it is possible to cushion the impact of VAT registration on growing businesses. This further work, together with representations received during the 1998 consultation exercise on the VAT registration threshold, will inform future Budget decisions on this issue.

Mr. Maude: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what his policy is on VAT exemptions for trade unions following the European Court ruling in the Institute of the Motor Industry case (No C-149/97). [85111]

Dawn Primarolo: Subscriptions to trade unions remain exempt from VAT.

Mr. Maude: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer from what dates he expects the VAT (Goods Used for Exempt Supplies) Order 1999 to apply; and if he will make a statement. [85117]

Dawn Primarolo: In their technical note which asked businesses for comments on the changes covered by this Order, Customs expected that the Order would take effect from 1 September 1999, but this will depend on the comments received from businesses and on the process of parliamentary drafting.

Mr. Maude: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if he will estimate the revenue implications for the Exchequer following the judgment of the European Court against the Republic of Italy (Case C-45/95). [85113]

Dawn Primarolo: Customs and Excise expect there to be a revenue gain of around £15 million per year, because some businesses will be unable to recover input VAT on expenses associated with the newly exempt sales of business cars. They expect this to be offset in the first year by a revenue loss of £10 million, arising from repayments made to certain non-profit making bodies, under a related change that will permit them to recover VAT on publications supplied to members.

Mr. Maude: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if he will make a statement on the definition of a car for VAT purposes following the judgment of the European Court against the Republic of Italy (Case C-45/95). [85112]

Dawn Primarolo: This European Court judgment does not directly affect the definition of a car for VAT purposes, though the proposed legislation to implement the new exemption will make certain minor—and unrelated—technical changes to the definition. Details of these, and of other proposed related changes, are set out in a Technical Note issued by HM Customs and Excise on 21 April 1999, a copy of which has been placed in the House of Commons Library.

Alcohol and Tobacco Smuggling

Mr. Maude: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what plans he has to amend the Beer Orders as a result of the report of the Alcohol and Tobacco Fraud Review. [85105]

Dawn Primarolo: Amending the Beer Orders is not a straightforward matter. Customs are still considering the costs and benefits and will be reporting their conclusions to me in due course.

Mr. Maude: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer (1) what consultations he has had with the Department for the Environment, Transport and the Regions about the effects on traffic and road safety of cross-channel smuggling and section 1.5.3 of the report of the Alcohol and Tobacco Fraud Review; [85102]

(2) what assessment he has made of section 1.5.3 of the report of the Alcohol and Tobacco Fraud Review and the effects on traffic and road safety of cross-channel smuggling. [85103]

Dawn Primarolo: Customs work closely with the Traffic Commissioners, the Police and other agencies who tackle a range of enforcement issues through their joint exercises. The issues raised by section 1.5.3 of the report are among those addressed by such exercises.

Mr. Maude: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if he will make a statement on the methodology used by Her Majesty's Customs and Excise for estimating the total volume of fraud and smuggling of alcohol and tobacco products. [85104]

Dawn Primarolo: HM Customs and Excise estimates of alcohol and tobacco smuggling by cross-channel and air passengers are based on data from Customs' own surveys of international passengers. The methodologies are detailed in a technical report placed by HM Customs and Excise in the House of Commons Library on 19 November 1998.

Republic of Ireland GDP

Mr. Heathcoat-Amory: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what is the per capita gross domestic product in the Republic of Ireland as a percentage of the EU average, for the most recent year available. [84956]

Ms Hewitt: The information requested falls within the responsibility of the Director of the Office for National Statistics. I have asked him to reply.

Letter from Tim Holt to Mr. David Heathcoat-Amory, dated 24 May 1999:

As Director of the Office for National Statistics (ONS), I have been asked to reply to your recent parliamentary question asking about the per capita gross domestic product of the Republic of Ireland.

The latest figures published by Eurostat (the Statistical Office of the European Community) are the preliminary results for 1997. These show the Republic of Ireland with a per capita gross domestic product of 102 per cent of the EU average. These estimates are subject to revision and definitive results will be published later this year.

Parental Leave

Ms Harman: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what plans he has to make available replacement income through working families tax credit or benefit to persons normally in receipt of working families tax credit who take unpaid parental leave under the provision of the Employment Relations Bill. [83610]

Dawn Primarolo *[holding answer 10 May 1999]:* There are currently no plans to provide replacement income through the Working Families Tax Credit for families where a person takes up their right to unpaid parental leave. But we continue to consider whether help should be given to people taking unpaid parental leave and how such help might be delivered.

Ms Harman: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what assessment he has made of how families *(a)* in receipt of and *(b)* not in receipt of the working families tax credit will make up for wages lost due to unpaid parental leave being taken under the provisions of the Employment Relations Bill. [83611]

Dawn Primarolo *[holding answer 10 May 1999]:* Families may make up for wages lost due to unpaid parental leave in a variety of ways independent of whether they are in receipt of the working families tax credit. Consequently it would not be possible to make the assessment that is envisaged.

LORD CHANCELLOR'S DEPARTMENT

Legal Aid

Mr. Beith: To ask the Minister of State, Lord Chancellor's Department what was the total annual expenditure on legal aid in each of the last five years and the annual real terms change; what is the expected total annual expenditure on legal aid in each of the next three years and the expected real terms change; and if he will make a statement. [84750]

Mr. Vaz: Net expenditure on legal aid in each of the last five years was as follows:

	£ million
1994–95	1,299
1995–96	1,391
1996–97	1,476
1997–98	1,526
1998–99[1]	1,600

[1] Estimated

The annual upward percentage change, in real terms, was as follows:

	Per cent.
1994–95	5.5
1995–96	4.5
1996–97	3.5
1997–98	0.7
1998–99[1]	3.3

[1] Estimated

Over the next three years the Government expect to spend on average £1,600 million each year. That is £248 million more than the previous Government planned.

The measures contained in the Access to Justice Bill will ensure that available funds are targeted on priority cases. Conditional fees will increase access to justice for everyone. This will release legal aid moneys which otherwise would be expended on cases that will now go forward under conditional fee agreements, to support cases of greater priority, for example, cases which should in the public interest be supported.

Community Legal Service

Jacqui Smith: To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department when the consultation paper setting out the proposals for the community legal service will be published. [85442]

Mr. Vaz: Copies of the Consultation Paper will be placed later today—Monday 24 May—in the Libraries of both Houses. It will also be available on the Lord Chancellor's Department website at www.open.gov.uk/lcd.

Written Answers to Questions

Tuesday 25 May 1999

WALES

Ministerial Meetings (US)

Mr. Matthew Taylor: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales how many times ministers in his Department held meetings with members and officials in the US Administration between 1 May 1997 and 1 June 1998, indicating the dates and locations of each meeting, the ministers involved and the name of the US departments involved in each meeting. [84316]

Mr. Michael: The previous Secretary of State received a courtesy call from the American Ambassador on 8 October 1997 in Cathays Park, Cardiff.

HIV/AIDS

Dr. Strang: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales how many people were newly diagnosed HIV positive (i) broken down by probable means of transmission and (ii) in total in *(a)* Wales and *(b)* each health authority area of Wales for each year from 1981 to 1998 and for 1999 to date. [84808]

Mr. Jon Owen Jones: Information provided by the Communicable Disease Surveillance Centre is given in the following table.

Newly diagnosed HIV positive cases by probable means of transmission [1]

Year	Sex between men	Sex between men and women	Injecting drug use	Injecting drug use and sex between men	Blood factor	Blood/tissue transfer	Mother to infant	Not known	Total
1981	1	—	—	—	1	1	—	—	2
1982	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—
1983	—	—	—	—	1	1	—	—	1
1984	3	—	—	—	30	30	—	—	33
1985	8	—	—	1	19	19	—	—	28
1986	21	3	1	1	2	2	—	—	28
1987	21	6	1	—	—	—	1	—	29
1988	20	10	1	1	—	—	—	2	34
1989	18	9	2	1	—	—	—	2	32
1990	17	10	1	—	—	—	—	4	32
1991	17	11	4	1	—	—	—	—	34
1992	35	12	1	—	—	—	—	—	49
1993	19	11	2	1	—	—	1	—	35
1994	23	14	4	—	—	—	—	1	42
1995	29	9	3	1	—	—	2	—	44
1996	20	9	1	—	—	—	—	4	35
1997	20	14	—	—	—	—	—	3	37
1998	14	12	3	—	—	—	—	—	29
1999[2]	1	—	—	—	—	—	—	2	3

[1] Cases reported by region/Health Authority of reporting officer. Therefore data do not necessarily equate to area of residence and may exclude Welsh residents diagnosed outside Wales but resident in Wales.
[2] To 31 March.
Source:
Communicable Disease Surveillance Centre

Newly diagnosed HIV positive cases by Health Authority of diagnosis [1]

Year	North Wales	Dyfed Powys	Morgannwg	Bro Taf	Gwent	Total
1981	—	—	—	2	—	2
1982	—	—	—	—	—	—
1983	—	—	—	1	—	1
1984	—	—	2	31	—	33
1985	6	—	5	17	—	28
1986	3	1	2	18	4	28
1987	4	2	6	15	2	29
1988	5	1	5	17	6	34
1989	10	3	4	15	—	32
1990	3	5	6	17	1	32
1991	4	—	2	27	1	34
1992	9	4	10	21	5	49
1993	10	2	10	11	2	35
1994	9	3	1	23	6	42
1995	10	4	14	12	4	44

Newly diagnosed HIV positive cases by Health Authority of diagnosis [1]

Year	North Wales	Dyfed Powys	Morgannwg	Bro Taf	Gwent	Total
1996	5	1	6	21	2	35
1997	7	1	5	21	3	37
1998	5	3	4	17	—	29
1999[2]	2	—	1	—	—	3

[1] Cases reported by region/Health Authority of reporting officer. Therefore data does not necessarily equate to area of residence and may exclude Welsh residents diagnosed outside Wales but resident in Wales.
[2] To 31 March.
Source:
Communicable Disease Surveillance Centre.

Following the transfer of functions, this issue will be a matter for the National Assembly.

Dr. Strang: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales if he will list the cumulative numbers of people with AIDS who died in *(a)* Wales and *(b)* each health authority area of Wales in each year from 1981 to 1998 and in 1999 to date. [84806]

Mr. Jon Owen Jones: Information provided by the Communicable Disease Surveillance Centre is given in the following table.

Cumulative numbers of people with AIDS known to have died

Year	North Wales [1]	Dyfed Powys [1]	Morgannwg	Bro Taf	Gwent	Total
1981	—	—	—	—	—	—
1982	—	—	—	—	—	—
1983	—	—	—	—	—	—
1984	—	—	—	2	—	2
1985	—	—	—	3	—	3
1986	2	—	—	7	2	11
1987	3	—	1	8	3	15
1988	4	1	1	14	3	23
1989	6	2	3	22	4	37
1990	9	3	6	26	4	48
1991	14	4	10	32	6	66
1992	15	5	14	38	8	80
1993	20	7	18	51	10	106
1994	24	10	23	59	13	129
1995	29	10	31	67	15	152
1996	31	10	34	75	18	168
1997	32	10	35	79	19	175
1998	32	10	35	81	19	177
1999 [2]	34	10	35	81	19	179

[1] Total excludes 1 case where year of death is not known
[2] To 31 March
Source:
Communicable Disease Surveillance Centre

Following the transfer of functions, this issue will be a matter for the National Assembly.

Dr. Strang: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales how many people with AIDS died in *(a)* Wales and *(b)* each health authority area of Wales in each year from 1981 to 1998 and in 1999 to date. [84805]

Mr. Jon Owen Jones: Information provided by the Communicable Disease Surveillance Centre is given in the following table.

People with AIDS known to have died

Year	North Wales [1]	Dyfed Powys [1]	Morgannwg	Bro Taf	Gwent	Total
1981	—	—	—	—	—	—
1982	—	—	—	—	—	—
1983	—	—	—	—	—	—
1984	—	—	—	2	—	2
1985	—	—	—	1	—	1
1986	2	—	—	4	2	8
1987	1	—	1	1	1	4
1988	1	1	—	6	—	8
1989	2	1	2	8	1	14
1990	3	1	3	4	—	11
1991	5	1	4	6	2	18
1992	1	1	4	6	2	14
1993	5	2	4	13	2	26
1994	4	3	5	8	3	23
1995	5	—	8	8	2	23
1996	2	—	3	8	3	16
1997	1	—	1	4	1	7
1998	—	—	—	2	—	2
1999 [2]	2	—	—	—	—	2

[1] Total excludes 1 case where year of death is not known
[2] To 31 March
Source:
Communicable Disease Surveillance Centre

Following the transfer of functions, this issue will be a matter for the National Assembly.

Dr. Strang: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales how many people diagnosed with AIDS and not known to have died there were in *(a)* Wales and *(b)* each health authority area of Wales in each year from 1981 to 1998 and in 1999 to date. [84804]

Mr. Jon Owen Jones: Information provided by the Communicable Disease Surveillance Centre is given in the following table.

People diagnosed with AIDS not known to have died

Year	North Wales	Dyfed Powys	Morgannwg	Bro Taf	Gwent	Total
1981	—	—	—	—	—	—
1982	—	—	—	—	—	—
1983	—	—	—	—	—	—
1984	—	—	—	—	—	—
1985	—	—	—	—	—	—
1986	—	—	—	—	—	—
1987	—	—	—	—	—	—
1988	—	—	1	—	—	1
1989	—	—	—	—	—	—
1990	—	—	—	—	—	—
1991	1	—	—	—	—	1
1992	—	—	—	1	—	1
1993	—	—	2	1	—	3
1994	—	1	—	4	—	5
1995	3	—	7	1	—	11
1996	1	—	3	4	2	10
1997	1	—	6	3	—	10
1998	—	—	1	6	—	7
1999 [1]	—	—	—	—	—	—

[1] To 31 March
Source:
Communicable Disease Surveillance Centre

Following the transfer of functions, this issue will be a matter for the National Assembly.

Dr. Strang: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales if he will list the cumulative number of people diagnosed with AIDS in *(a)* Wales and *(b)* each health authority area of Wales in each year from 1981 to 1998 and in 1999 to date. [84807]

Mr. Jon Owen Jones: Information provided by the Communicable Disease Surveillance Centre is given in the following table.

Cumulative number of people diagnosed with AIDS by Health Authority of diagnosis [1]

Year ending	North Wales	Dyfed Powys	Morgannwg	Bro Taf [2]	Gwent	Total
1981	—	—	—	—	—	—
1982	—	—	—	1	—	1
1983	—	—	—	2	—	2
1984	—	—	—	4	—	4
1985	—	—	—	7	—	7
1986	4	—	—	10	2	16
1987	5	1	1	12	3	22
1988	9	3	4	24	4	44
1989	11	6	7	32	5	61
1990	15	7	10	38	8	78
1991	16	7	15	45	11	94
1992	17	9	21	48	14	109
1993	26	10	26	59	14	135
1994	33	12	30	74	15	164
1995	37	12	44	82	17	192
1996	39	12	48	90	21	210

Cumulative number of people diagnosed with AIDS by Health Authority of diagnosis [1]

Year ending	North Wales	Dyfed Powys	Morgannwg	Bro Taf [2]	Gwent	Total
1997	40	12	54	94	21	221
1998	40	12	55	100	21	228
1999 [3]	41	12	55	100	21	229

[1] Cases reported by region/Health Authority of reporting officer. Therefore data do not necessarily equate to area of residence and may exclude Welsh residents diagnosed outside Wales but resident in Wales. Data do not equate to prevalent cases due to the mobility/mortality of cases.
[2] Total excludes 1 case where year of diagnosis is not known.
[3] To 31 March
Source:
Communicable Disease Surveillance Centre

Following the transfer of functions, this issue will be a matter for the National Assembly.

Dr. Strang: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales if he will list the cumulative number of people who had been diagnosed HIV positive and not known to have died (i) broken down by probable means of transmission and (ii) in total in *(a)* Wales and *(b)* each health authority area of Wales for each year from 1981 to 1998 and for 1999 to date. [84810]

Mr. Jon Owen Jones: Information provided by the Communicable Disease Surveillance Centre is given in the following table.

Cumulative numbers of newly diagnosed HIV positive cases, in people not known to have died, by probable means of transmission [1]

Year ending	Sex between men	Sex between men and women	Injecting drug use	Injecting drug use and sex between men	Blood factor	Blood/tissue transfer	Mother to infant	Not known	Total
1981	—	—	—	—	1	—	—	—	1
1982	—	—	—	—	1	—	—	—	1
1983	—	—	—	—	2	—	—	—	2
1984	—	—	—	—	15	—	—	—	15
1985	2	—	—	—	21	—	—	—	23
1986	14	2	—	—	22	—	—	—	38
1987	24	6	1	—	22	—	—	—	53
1988	37	13	1	—	22	—	—	1	74
1989	47	20	2	—	22	—	—	1	92
1990	57	27	3	—	22	—	—	4	113
1991	69	34	6	—	22	—	1	4	136
1992	90	43	7	—	22	—	1	4	167
1993	101	51	9	1	22	—	2	4	190
1994	114	62	13	1	22	—	2	4	218
1995	136	69	16	2	22	1	2	4	252
1996	155	77	16	2	22	1	3	7	283
1997	175	90	16	2	22	1	3	10	319
1998	189	101	19	2	22	1	3	10	347
1999 [2]	190	101	19	2	22	1	3	12	350

[1] Cases reported by region/Health Authority of reporting officer. Therefore data do not necessarily equate to area of residence and may exclude Welsh residents diagnosed outside Wales but resident in Wales. Data do not equate to prevalent cases in Wales due to the mobility of people
[2] To 31 March.
Source:
Communicable Disease Surveillance Centre

Cumulative numbers of newly diagnosed HIV positive cases, in people not know to have died, by Health Authority of diagnosed [1]

Year ending	North Wales	Dyfed Powys	Morgannwg	Bro Taf	Gwent	Total
1981	—	—	—	1	—	1
1982	—	—	—	1	—	1
1983	—	—	—	2	—	2
1984	—	—	1	14	—	15
1985	3	—	3	17	—	23
1986	5	1	3	27	2	38
1987	7	1	5	37	3	53
1988	8	2	9	49	6	74
1989	13	4	12	57	6	92
1990	14	9	16	68	6	113
1991	16	9	16	89	6	136
1992	22	11	20	105	9	167
1993	30	12	26	112	10	190
1994	35	14	27	129	13	218
1995	44	17	34	141	16	252
1996	48	18	39	160	18	283
1997	55	19	44	180	21	319

Cumulative numbers of newly diagnosed HIV positive cases, in people not know to have died, by Health Authority of diagnosed [1]

Year ending	North Wales	Dyfed Powys	Morgannwg	Bro Taf	Gwent	Total
1998	59	22	48	197	21	347
1999 [2]	61	22	49	197	21	350

[1] Cases reported by region/Health Authority of reporting officer. Therefore data do not necessarily equate to area of residence and may exclude Welsh residents diagnosed outside Wales but resident in Wales. Data do not equate to prevalent cases in Wales due to the mobility of people
[2] To 31 March.
Source:
Communicable Disease Surveillance Centre

Following the transfer of functions, this issue will be a matter for the National Assembly.

Dr. Strang: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales if he will list the cumulative number of people who had been diagnosed HIV positive (i) broken down by probable

means of transmission and (ii) in total in *(a)* Wales and *(b)* each health authority area of Wales for each year from 1981 to 1998 and for 1999 to date. [84809]

Mr. Jon Owen Jones: Information provided by the Communicable Disease Surveillance Centre is given in the following tables.

Cumulative numbers of newly diagnosed HIV positive cases by probable means of transmission [1]

Year ending	Sex between men	Sex between men and women	Injecting drug use	Injecting drug use and sex between men
1981	1	—	—	—
1982	1	—	—	—
1983	1	—	—	—
1984	4	—	—	—
1985	12	—	—	1
1986	33	3	1	2
1987	54	9	2	2
1988	74	19	3	3
1989	92	28	5	4
1990	109	38	6	4
1991	126	49	10	5
1992	161	61	11	5
1993	180	72	13	6
1994	203	86	17	6
1995	232	95	20	7
1996	252	104	21	7
1997	272	118	21	7
1998	286	130	24	7
1999[1]	287	130	24	7

Year ending	Blood factor	Blood/ tissue transfer	Mother to infant	Not known	Total
1981	1	—	—	—	2
1982	1	—	—	—	2
1983	2	—	—	—	3
1984	32	—	—	—	36
1985	51	—	—	—	64
1986	53	—	—	—	92
1987	53	1	—	—	121
1988	53	1	—	2	155
1989	53	1	—	4	187
1990	53	1	—	8	219
1991	53	1	1	8	253
1992	53	1	2	8	302
1993	53	2	3	8	337
1994	53	2	3	9	379
1995	53	4	3	9	423
1996	53	4	4	13	458
1997	53	4	4	16	495
1998	53	4	4	16	524
1999[2]	53	4	4	18	527

Cumulative numbers of newly diagnosed HIV positive cases by Health Authority of diagnosis [1]

Year ending	North Wales	Dyfed Powys	Morgannwg	Bro Taf	Gwent	Total
1981	—	—	—	2	—	2
1982	—	—	—	2	—	2
1983	—	—	—	3	—	3
1984	—	—	2	34	—	36
1985	6	—	7	51	—	64
1986	9	1	9	69	4	92
1987	13	3	15	84	6	121
1988	18	4	20	101	12	155
1989	28	7	24	116	12	187
1990	31	12	30	133	13	219
1991	35	12	32	160	14	253
1992	44	16	42	181	19	302
1993	54	18	52	192	21	337
1994	63	21	53	215	27	379
1995	73	25	67	227	31	423
1996	78	26	73	248	33	458
1997	85	27	78	269	36	495
1998	90	30	82	286	36	524
1999[2]	92	30	83	286	36	527

[1] Cases reported by region/Health Authority of reporting officer. Therefore data does not necessarily equate to area of residence and may exclude Welsh residents diagnosed outside Wales but resident in Wales. Data does not equate to prevalent cases due to the mobility/mortality of cases.
[2] To 31 March
Source:
Communicable Disease Surveillance Centre

Following the transfer of functions, this issue will be a matter for the National Assembly.

HOME DEPARTMENT

Young Offenders

Dr. Cable: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what is the full complement of health care offenders and nurses at *(a)* Feltham Young Offenders Unit and *(b)* other young offender units. [84846]

Mr. George Howarth: The figures requested are given in the table.

Complements of healthcare staff at young offender institutions

Location	Principal officers (healthcare)	Senior lofficers (healthcare)	Prison officers (healthcare)	Nurses—all grades	Total
Feltham	2	3	8	17	30
Aylesbury	1	1	2	6	10
Brinsford	1	0	0	20	21
Castington	0	1	0	10	11
Hollesley Bay	0	1	2	3	6
Huntercombe	0	1	1	2	4
Lancaster Farms	0	0	0	22	22
Onley	0	0	1	7	8
Portland	0	1	3	1	5
Stoke Heath	0	0	0	12	12

Complements of healthcare staff at young offender institutions

Location	Principal officers (healthcare)	Senior officers (healthcare)	Prison officers (healthcare)	Nurses—all grades	Total
Thorn Cross	0	0	2	0	2
Werrington	0	1	1	1	3
Wetherby	0	1	0	3	4

Macpherson Report

Mr. Peter Bottomley: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will make a statement on police *(a)* progress in implementing and *(b)* plans to implement recommendations of the Macpherson report. [85063]

Mr. Straw: On 24 March I published, an Action Plan which sets out how the report's recommendations will be taken forward. Progress has been made on implementing the recommendations in line with the published plan. Specifically in April:

New police discipline procedures and code of conduct came into effect.

Her Majesty's Inspector of Constabulary inspection of the Metropolitan Police is under way.

Targets for the recruitment, retention and career progression of minority ethnic officers were set and published.

New guidance to the police on pre-inquest disclosure in relation to deaths in police custody was issued.

I wrote to all local crime and disorder reduction partnerships about tackling racist crime.

A new internal inspection and review framework was introduced within the Metropolitan Police.

A draft manual of police operations in relation to race and hate crime was issued for consultation.

The Steering Group, chaired by me, which has responsibility for overseeing implementation of the report, met for the first time on 18 May.

Community Supervision

Mr. Clappison: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many unacceptable absences are allowed before an offender on community supervision becomes the subject of breach proceedings. [84889]

Mr. George Howarth: The current National Standards for the Supervision of Offenders in the Community require breach proceedings to be taken on, or before, a third unacceptable absence. The Government are keen to improve the enforcement of community penalties and are at present reviewing the National Standards with a view to introducing revised Standards next April.

Mr. Clappison: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many people were on the Probation Service's community supervision case load for (i) 1996, (ii) 1997 and (iii) 1998; and what the probation budget was for England and Wales for each of those years. [84888]

Mr. George Howarth: The case load figures are given in the table. The budget figures are shown in the Government's Expenditure Plans 1999–2000 to 2001–02 for the Home Office and Charity Commission (Volume Two).

Persons supervised by the probation service
England and Wales 31 December

Number of persons (thousand)

	All persons supervised [1]
1996	171
1997	185
1998[2]	191

[1] Includes those supervised under criminal court orders, those supervised pre and post-release from custody, and those under Family Court supervision.
[2] Estimated figure at 30 September 1998.

Probation Orders

Mr. Clappison: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many offenders were made subject to (i) a Probation Order and (ii) a Combination Order in *(a)* 1997 and *(b)* 1998; and how many in each case have been breached for failure to comply with the terms of the order. [84890]

Mr. George Howarth: The available figures are given in the tables.

Persons starting supervision by the probation service
England and Wales 31 December

Number of persons (thousand)

	Probation Order	Combination Order
1997	50.9	18.9
1997 (first 9 months)	38.2	14.3
1998 (first 9 months)[1]	40.6	15.2

[1] Estimated

Termination of orders supervised by the probation service
England and Wales 1997

Number of persons (thousand)

	All terminations	Failed to comply with the terms of the order [1]
Probation order	51.4	2.3
Combination order	16.8	1.5

[1] Does not include terminated early for conviction of an offence.

Asylum Seekers

Fiona Mactaggart: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many people applied for asylum in the UK during 1998; how many of these applied (i) at a port of entry and (ii) within the country; how many decisions were made; and of those how many were *(a)* recognition as a refugee, *(b)* exceptional leave to enter or remain and *(c)* refusal of asylum; and of the refusals, how many were (x) on safe third country grounds, (y) on non-compliance grounds and (z) refused after full consideration of the case; how many applications were withdrawn; and how many asylum applications were outstanding at the end of the year. [85045]

Mr. Mike O'Brien: The information requested will be published on 27 May in the annual Home Office Statistical Bulletin, "Asylum Statistics United Kingdom 1998", a copy of which will be placed in the Library of the House on that day.

Fiona Mactaggart: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many people applied for asylum in the UK in *(a)* March and *(b)* April; how many people were (i) recognised as refugees, (ii) granted exceptional leave and (iii) refused asylum in each of those months; and how many decisions on the asylum backlog were taken in each of those months. [85043]

Mr. Mike O'Brien: The information requested will be made available on the Home Office Internet site at http://www.homeoffice.gov.uk/rds/index.htm, as part of the monthly reporting of asylum figures, on 25 May 1999.

Immigration and Nationality Directorate

Fiona Mactaggart: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department when he expects the pilot of the Casework Programme in the Immigration and Nationality Directorate to begin. [84975]

Mr. Mike O'Brien: Piloting involves using the system on real cases for the first time and will not begin until the system has been thoroughly tested by the Immigration and Nationality Directorate. It is not possible at this stage to give a firm date, since testing has not yet begun.

Prisoners (Voting Rights)

Mr. Stinchcombe: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many working days elapsed between the issuing of guidance to prisons in regard to arrangements for unconvicted prisoners wishing to take part in the local government elections and elections for the Welsh Assembly and Scottish Parliament and the date by which applications to vote by post or proxy had to be received by electoral registration officers. [84949]

Mr. George Howarth: Five working days elapsed between the date that guidance was issued to prisons by electronic mail, and the closing date for receipt by electoral registration officers for applications to vote by post or proxy.

Incentives and Earned Privileges Scheme

Mr. Stinchcombe: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will list, by prison, the number of prisoners on each level of the Incentives and Earned Privileges Scheme. [84948]

Mr. George Howarth: The provisional figures for 30 April 1999, which are subject to final validation, are given in the table.

Prisoners on basic, standard and enhanced regimes

Prison name	*Basic*	*Standard*	*Enhanced*
Acklington	13	240	375
Albany	7	91	335
Aldington	1	67	63
Altcourse	19	481	229
Ashwell	40	243	202
Askham Grange	0	36	70
Aylesbury	0	288	76
Bedford	3	314	57
Belmarsh	6	607	102
Birmingham	18	954	94
Blakenhurst	191	586	53
Blantyre House	36	17	61
Blundeston	12	272	72
Brinsford	120	251	118
Bristol	8	447	100
Brixton	1	409	299
Brockhill	17	100	21
Buckley Hall	9	197	175
Bullingdon	18	719	106
Bullwood Hall	7	76	50
Camp Hill	15	360	81
Canterbury	4	275	2
Cardiff	24	417	217
Castington	19	315	41
Channings Wood	8	277	174
Chelmsford	3	358	28
Coldingley	10	184	90
Cookham Wood	0	82	67
Dartmoor	15	556	63
Deerbolt	28	305	90
Doncaster	21	873	168
Dorchester	0	166	19
Dover	11	218	21
Downview	1	102	236
Drake Hall	2	140	68
Durham	12	196	674
East Sutton Park	0	64	26
Eastwood Park	1	186	55
Elmley	10	645	228
Erlestoke	1	132	157
Everthorpe	9	318	130
Exeter	3	337	98
Featherstone	15	535	45
Feltham	37	672	131
Ford	0	136	195
Foston Hall	5	90	61
Frankland	0	0	0
Full Sutton	16	214	254
Garth	9	500	132
Gartree	2	64	296
Glen Parva	65	554	218
Gloucester	14	220	48
Grendon	4	4	82
Guys Marsh	21	345	129
Haslar	0	122	26
Hatfield	3	112	14
Haverigg	4	162	181
Hewell Grange	0	105	63
Highdown	6	600	65
Highpoint	27	410	243
Hindley	10	385	74
Hollesley Bay	21	21	197
Holloway	21	393	93
Holme House	18	825	105
Hull	14	328	150
Huntercombe	8	142	128
Kingston	1	1	174
Kirkham	15	298	101
Kirklevington	0	49	131
Lancaster	3	188	24
Lancaster Farms	45	272	140
Latchmere House	0	82	93
Leeds	30	919	218
Leicester	11	300	36
Lewes	5	392	49
Leyhill	7	148	228
Lincoln	1	313	133
Lindholme	20	558	88
Littlehey	17	491	122
Liverpool	11	1,015	290
Long Lartin	40	131	170

Prisoners on basic, standard and enhanced regimes

Prison name	*Basic*	*Standard*	*Enhanced*
Low Newton	1	62	37
Lowdham Grange	12	58	414
Maidstone	11	256	263
Manchester	35	274	808
Moorland	28	581	160
Morton Hall	8	67	84
Mount	0	472	147
New Hall	4	249	67
North Sea Camp	0	111	59
Northallerton	6	280	4
Norwich	6	539	127
Nottingham	4	295	123
Onley	51	462	75
Parc	28	534	190
Parkhurst	26	226	211
Pentonville	8	833	270
Portland	5	406	98
Preston	8	578	81
Ranby	49	562	118
Reading	2	98	101
Risley	10	403	261
Rochester	5	326	27
Send	0	17	56
Shepton Mallet	7	169	24
Shrewsbury	32	200	79
Stafford	33	469	110
Standford Hill	0	114	127
Stocken	5	466	102
Stoke Heath	133	366	116
Styal	0	343	107
Sudbury	0	232	259
Swaleside	4	308	290
Swansea	1	254	71
Swinfen Hall	18	114	141
Thorn Cross	1	189	89
Usk	5	5	89
Verne	5	293	270
Wakefield	35	475	382
Wandsworth	81	930	210
Wayland	3	389	236
Wealstun	3	3	275
Weare	2	222	72
Wellingborough	7	254	60
Werrington	29	36	39
Wetherby	17	177	122
Whatton	0	110	160
Whitemoor	35	213	201
Winchester	4	351	140
Wolds	21	191	183
Woodhill	18	623	40
Wormwood Scrubs	1	474	315
Wymott	3	556	224

Female Prisoners (Prescription-only Drugs)

Mr. Stinchcombe: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many doses of prescription-only *(a)* psychotropic, *(b)* hypnotic, *(c)* other drugs acting on the central nervous system and *(d)* other drugs were prescribed in each prison holding female prisoners in the most recent year for which figures are available. [84946]

Mr. George Howarth: The information requested is not collected centrally and could be obtained only at disproportionate cost.

Pharmaceuticals are generally purchased locally and managed using a number of systems. Also, prescription records are kept within individual prisoner medical files, making it difficult to aggregate information about total usage of individual drugs, or families of drugs, in a meaningful way.

The Prison Service, in deciding on the range of management information about health care activity that is collected from prisons, tries to strike a balance between the costs involved, including the administrative burden on prison staff, and the possible benefits. However, increasing use of Information Technology offers the opportunity to broaden the range of statistics that can be readily available and this matter is kept under review.

Prisoners (Voting Rights)

Mr. Stinchcombe: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many unconvicted prisoners in England and Wales exercised their right to vote in the recent local government elections and elections for the Welsh Assembly and Scottish Parliament. [84947]

Mr. George Howarth: The figures for the number of unconvicted prisoners who exercised their right to vote in the recent local government elections and elections for the Welsh Assembly and Scottish Parliament are not held centrally and could be provided only at disproportionate cost.

Home Detention Curfew

Mr. Stinchcombe: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will list by prison the number of prisoners *(a)* assessed for release on home detention curfew, *(b)* released and *(c)* recalled. [84942]

Mr. George Howarth: The table gives the information requested up to the end of April according to the Prison Service's inmate information system. The number of prisoners assessed for home detention curfew at each establishment is estimated from the population extracts for the end of each month for prisoners who had a calculated home detention curfew eligibility date within the relevant period. The number actually assessed may be more or less due to the transfer or reception of prisoners during the month.

Home detention curfew—numbers eligible, placed on curfew and recalled—28 January to 30 April 1999

	Eligible (estimated)	*Curfewed*	*Revoked*
Acklington	96	30	3
Albany	2	0	0
Aldington	73	28	2
Altcourse	139	21	0
Ashwell	80	12	1
Askham Grange	41	40	0
Aylesbury	6	3	1
Bedford	118	19	1
Belmarsh	121	20	3
Birmingham	289	164	9
Blakenhurst	236	62	1
Blantyre House	0	0	0
Blundeston	18	6	0
Brinsford	88	13	0
Bristol	100	16	2
Brixton	141	47	3
Brockhill	39	9	0
Buckley Hall	31	5	0
Bullingdon	210	58	4
Bullwood Hall	19	7	0

Home detention curfew—numbers eligible, placed on curfew and recalled—28 January to 30 April 1999

	Eligible (estimated)	Curfewed	Revoked
Camp Hill	113	12	0
Canterbury	65	17	0
Cardiff	217	55	4
Castington	47	5	0
Channings Wood	106	21	1
Chelmsford	78	15	1
Colchester	0	0	0
Coldingley	8	0	0
Cookham Wood	26	5	1
Dartmoor	66	12	1
Deerbolt	134	15	0
Doncaster	216	49	3
Dorchester	59	4	0
Dover	82	19	3
Downview	20	12	1
Drake Hall	160	72	3
Durham	225	42	2
Earlstoke	40	14	0
East Sutton Park	37	30	0
Eastwood Park	99	32	0
Elmley	156	32	4
Everthorpe	103	50	4
Exeter	157	53	5
Featherstone	68	26	3
Feltham	103	24	1
Ford	144	119	2
Foston Hall	35	9	1
Frankland	0	0	0
Full Sutton	0	0	0
Garth	0	0	0
Gartree	0	0	0
Glen Parva	173	37	2
Gloucester	53	13	0
Grendon	72	69	1
Guys Marsh	196	61	4
Haslar	2	2	0
Hatfield	87	60	2
Haverigg	112	18	0
Hewell Grange	100	102	1
Highdown	167	69	2
Highpoint	154	43	2
Hindley	116	13	0
Hollesley Bay	82	48	5
Holloway	75	28	1
Holme House	323	69	3
Hull	181	31	0
Huntercombe	95	61	4
Kingston	0	0	0
Kirkham	330	203	8
Kirklevington	44	38	0
Lancaster	152	6	0
Lancaster Farms	79	19	0
Latchmere House	0	0	0
Leeds	238	51	5
Leicester	36	1	0
Lewes	133	38	4
Leyhill	44	34	0
Lincoln	110	20	1
Lindholme	144	63	3
Littlehey	76	12	0
Liverpool	498	60	3
Long Lartin	0	0	0
Low Newton	37	19	1
Lowdham Grange	0	0	0
Maidstone	7	3	0
Manchester	99	15	0
Moorland	86	43	2
Morton Hall	135	97	3

Home detention curfew—numbers eligible, placed on curfew and recalled—28 January to 30 April 1999

	Eligible (estimated)	Curfewed	Revoked
New Hall	103	30	0
North Sea Camp	108	80	0
Northallerton	87	30	3
Norwich	264	128	6
Nottingham	44	2	1
Onley	161	65	3
Parc	155	7	0
Parkhurst	10	1	0
Pentonville	278	65	5
Portland	114	24	0
Preston	155	19	3
Pucklechurch	0	0	0
Ranby	217	33	0
Reading	62	12	0
Risley	257	33	0
Rochester	17	9	0
Send	11	6	0
Shepton Mallet	34	12	0
Shrewsbury	86	46	6
Stafford	116	27	2
Stanford Hill	93	97	2
Stocken	75	26	1
Stoke Heath	193	17	0
Styal	64	38	3
Sudbury	82	69	2
Swaleside	4	3	0
Swansea	92	18	2
Swinfen Hall	6	2	0
The Mount	93	34	2
The Verne	43	8	0
The Wolds	38	7	1
Thorn Cross	88	61	9
Usk	71	54	0
Wakefield	0	0	0
Wandsworth	244	58	1
Wayland	78	33	2
Wealstun	81	63	1
Weare	173	54	2
Wellingborough	49	25	1
Werrington	0	0	0
Wetherby	41	20	2
Whatton	20	0	0
Whitemoor	0	0	0
Winchester	133	55	5
Woodhill	182	53	1
Wormwood Scrubs	203	70	3
Wymott	80	11	0

Bookmakers

Mr. Cunliffe: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what decision he has taken on the composition of the Bookmakers Committee. [85651]

Mr. George Howarth: On 3 December 1998, we sought the views of interested bodies on proposals for reconstituting the Bookmakers' Committee. Having taken careful account of the views expressed we have decided to make those changes. We believe that this will improve the Committee's ability to represent bookmakers' interests in a balanced way in carrying out its task of recommending to the Horserace Betting Levy Board the levy rates to be paid by bookmakers for the benefit of horseracing.

Therefore, I have today made regulations to establish the following membership:

	Seats
Betting Office Licensees Association Ltd	2
National Association of Bookmakers Ltd	2
British Betting Office Association Ltd	2
Ladbroke Racing Ltd	2
Willian Hill Organisation Ltd	2
Coral Racing Ltd	2
Total	12

In providing for the three companies which in 1998–99 contributed nearly 80 per cent. of the total levy yield to have half of the seats on the Committee, we are redressing their previous under-representation while at the same time recognising the extent to which there are many smaller firms whose ability to pay needs to be properly represented. In reaching this decision, we have sought to achieve a reasonable balance between the different bookmaking interests and organisations. The factors taken into account were the size of organisations' membership, the number of off-course shops, the leviable turnover and the levy paid. We do not believe that the new structure will give any companies double representation on the Committee. Nor do we believe that continuing representation of the Scottish Independent Bookmakers Association is justified, given the small number of members, some of whom also belong to other trade associations. We believe that the new constitution will still take proper account of the interests of small independent bookmakers, whether in Scotland or South of the Border.

It will be for the Committee itself to decide who will chair it and how it will manage its business. We very much hope that the Committee will make every effort to reach agreement on the next levy scheme with the Levy Board. Co-operation between bookmaking and racing interests is important in this as in other areas.

We will keep the new arrangements under review, with the help of the independent members of the Levy Board, whose brief it is to have regard to the interests of racing, bookmakers in all categories and the punter.

Monkeys

Mr. Baker: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what steps he has taken to ensure that *(a)* the importation of monkeys to Shamrock Farm, Henfield and *(b)* the treatment of monkeys at Shamrock Farm, Henfield is conducted in accordance with approved procedures and legislation. [85362]

Mr. George Howarth: The transportation and importation of animals is primarily a matter for the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food. In 1996, the Home Office introduced new measures relating to the acquisition of non-human primates from overseas sources for use in procedures under the terms of the Animals (Scientific Procedures) Act 1986. These are summarised in Appendix A to the 'Statistics of Scientific Procedures on Living Animals, Great Britain, 1997'. In support of these new measures, the Home Office set administrative requirements including that

> additional records be kept of the breeding and conditions of housing and husbandry at the centre from which the animals were obtained; and
>
> after each delivery of primates from an overseas source, the Home Office be sent:
>
> confirmation that the animals were shipped according to the agreed plan and arrived safely;
>
> lifetime records for each animal;
>
> a report of the veterinary inspection that must be carried out on arrival; and
>
> within six weeks, details of any morbidity and mortality arising during the first four weeks following arrival in the United Kingdom.

These are in addition to the records on the source, use (where appropriate) and disposal of animals that all designated establishments are required to keep and make available to the Home Office on request.

All designated establishments must meet the terms and conditions of the certificate of designation and, unless otherwise authorised, are expected to comply with the requirements of the relevant code of practice for the housing and care of animals.

Responsibility for abiding by the laws rests primarily with the individuals concerned and all establishments are now required to have local ethical review processes which, amongst other things, will provide advice about the care and welfare of animals.

All designated establishments are, however, regularly visited by Home Office inspectors, often without notice, to monitor compliance with all the relevant controls including those relating to the acquisition and care of animals.

Prisoner Accommodation (Offences against Children)

Mr. Clappison: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what plans he has to provide accommodation at prison sites for offenders convicted of offences against children on the completion of their sentence; if he will list the prisons to be used for such accommodation; and if he will make a statement. [85344]

Mr. Boateng: There are plans to transform office accommodation within the secure perimeter of Nottingham Prison into bedsits to house two or three offenders previously convicted of offences against children. They will live under close supervision. We have no such plans for any other prison.

Criminal Injuries Compensation Scheme

Mr. Dismore: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many claims were lodged outside the limitation period in each year of operation of the Criminal Injuries Compensation Scheme 1996; and of these, how many were allowed to proceed. [85365]

Mr. Boateng: The Criminal Injuries Compensation Authority has provided the following information:

Year	Claims outside time limit	Number allowed to proceed
1996–97	5,507	5,426
1997–98	5,972	5,465
1998–99	5,948	5,067

Mr. Dismore: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many awards at the maximum level 25 rate were *(a)* made and *(b)* remain outstanding for each year of operation of the Criminal Injuries Compensation Scheme 1996. [85366]

Mr. Boateng: The Criminal Injuries Compensation Authority advises that the following level 25 awards have been made:

Year	
1996–97	0
1997–98	1 (interim)
1998–99	3

One further award at level 25 is currently on offer.

It is not possible to say how many of the thousands of applications presently in the system, and where further inquiries are being made, for example, of the police and medical authorities, will result in an offer of award at level 25.

Criminal Matters (Newspaper Reports)

Mr. Jack: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what representations he has received from the Newspaper Society about their members' ability to report on criminal matters and trials where young people under the age of 18 years are involved; and if he will make a statement. [85274]

Mr. Boateng: The Youth Justice and Criminal Evidence Bill introduced in the House of Lords on 3 December 1998 proposes changes to reporting restrictions in respect of under 18's. A number of media organisations, including the Newspaper Society, have written to Ministers and met with my right hon. and noble Friend Lord Williams and officials to argue for a wider right to report identities. The Government are carefully considering the points made.

ENVIRONMENT, TRANSPORT AND THE REGIONS

Goods Vehicles

Mr. Paterson: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will estimate the cost per mile of running a 40 tonne goods vehicle in *(a)* the UK, *(b)* Belgium, *(c)* France, *(d)* Holland, *(e)* Germany, *(f)* Italy, *(g)* Luxembourg, *(h)* Portugal, *(i)* Spain and *(j)* Austria. [81459]

Ms Glenda Jackson: The information requested by the hon. Member is not available in the form requested and could be obtained only at disproportionate cost.

Mobile Refrigeration Units (Solar Energy)

Dr. Whitehead: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what examination his Department has made of the feasibility of installing photo-voltaic cells on the roofs of large refrigerated articulated trucks in order to power mobile refrigeration units by renewable means. [84317]

Ms Glenda Jackson: My Department is aware of the development work that has been carried out by J. Sainsburys plc in partnership with Southampton University and a consortium of manufacturers. An articulated HGV using photo-voltaic cells to power the refrigeration unit of the trailer has been in daily use for the past two years. Although such a vehicle requires expensive initial capital investment and the additional weight of the power unit results in a loss of vehicle payload, the technology has proved reliable and has the potential to be cost effective. The Department of Trade and Industry is supporting a project under its new and renewable energy programme looking at the further development of Sainsbury's photo-voltaic powered refrigeration unit.

The main benefit derived from use of this power source has been reduced noise, since an internal combustion engine is no longer required to power the refrigeration unit. Additional benefits are zero emissions from the refrigeration itself and low maintenance costs. As the technology can only be used to operate chill units, designed to operate at temperatures down to +3°C there is some loss of trailer flexibility.

Local Safety Schemes

Mr. Gordon Marsden: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions (1) what plans he has to allocate funding to highway authorities for the provision of safety measures at sites with an accident record of less than three years; [84633]

(2) what plans he has to review the criteria for allocating funding to highway authorities under the Local Safety Scheme Programme; [84634]

(3) what assessment he has made of the policy to restrict funding allocations under the Local Safety Scheme Programme to sites with a three-year accident record; [84631]

(4) what plans he has to review the current guidelines for highway authorities on the provision of accident reduction and traffic calming measures; [84632]

(5) what assessment he has made of the impact on road accident reduction of the Local Safety Scheme Programme. [84643]

Ms Glenda Jackson: Under the Transport Policies and Programme (TPP) regime for local capital transport expenditure, funding for Local Safety Schemes was restricted to sites which had a three year record of accidents. A consistent pattern of accidents suggested a problem with the road layout which was likely to be alleviated by engineering measures, rather than randomly occurring accidents arising from other causes, such as driver behaviour.

In terms of assessment, the 1996 Transport Research Laboratory study "Accident Reductions from Local Authority Safety Schemes using Transport Supplementary Grant" outlined the success of the general approach to these schemes. An overall 29 per cent. reduction in accidents followed the implementation of the schemes and an overall first year rate of return of 190 per cent. was achieved. Most of the schemes produced a reduction in the severity of accidents; there was a 29 per cent. drop in slight casualties, a 46 per cent. drop in serious

casualties and an 88 per cent. drop in fatalities. A new research project is currently looking in more depth at the effectiveness of recent local safety schemes and is expected to be completed later in 1999.

The Government's Transport White Paper "A New Deal for Transport: Better for Everyone" announced the replacement of the TPP system with Local Transport Plans (LTPs). These plans will place much greater emphasis on targets and the strategy to achieve those targets rather than individual projects. There will be a greater emphasis on local authorities getting results, but greater flexibility in how they achieve them.

In April this year we published guidance to local authorities on producing the provisional Local Transport Plans for 2000–01, due to be submitted in July 1999. Consistent with the new approach, it does not prescribe that expenditure be on sites with a three year accident record. Local authorities will, however, need to continue to examine where accidents and accident casualties are occurring and to plan cost effective remedial engineering measures as one element of an overall safety strategy. The LTP guidance will be reviewed following receipt of the provisional plans in July and we expect to produce further guidance in time for the full LTPs, due in July 2000.

We will continue to issue advice on the technical aspects of traffic calming to local highway authorities through Traffic Advisory Leaflets.

Genetically Modified Foods

Mr. Burgon: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions, if he has responded to the Local Government Association statement on genetically modified foods. [75496]

Mr. Meacher: Yes, I have responded to the Local Government Association statement on genetically modified foods and a copy has been placed in the Library.

Media Relations

Mr. Baker: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions how many *(a)* civil servants and *(b)* special advisers involved in media relations were employed within his Department at 1 May (i) 1997, (ii) 1998 and (iii) 1999. [84201]

Mr. Meale *[holding answer 18 May 1999]:* Detailed information on the numbers of permanent civil servants employed in Departmental Press Offices during the financial years 1997–98 and 1998–99 were provided in a memorandum dated 16 June 1998 to the Select Committee on Public Administration and published in its report on the Government Information and Communication Service (HC 770) in July 1998. A copy is in the Library of the House. The number of GICS Press Officers in post in DETR(C) on 1 May 1999 was 37.

Special Advisers in this Department have ad hoc contact with the media but none are specifically employed in media relations.

Global Warming

Mr. Colman: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what assessment he has made of the report published in the *New Scientist* on 1 May on the speeding-up of the cooling of the mesosphere and its likely impact on global warming. [84909]

Mr. Meale: Cooling of the upper atmosphere is an expected consequence of increasing greenhouse gas concentrations, and although the reported study is yet to be completed, and the size of the cooling confirmed, cooling of the mesosphere is not expected to impact significantly predictions of climate change.

Canals

Mr. Gill: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what provision exists to facilitate the reinstatement of canals obstructed by road construction and improvement. [84905]

Mr. Meale: There is a duty for a highway authority wishing to promote a road scheme which would cross a waterway where there are extant navigation rights to provide a suitable crossing. The Department is reviewing the issues of managing the different interests involved in canal restoration and highway schemes. This should be covered in the daughter document on inland waterways which will be published in the next few months.

British Rail Employees (Asbestos)

Ms Kelly: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions, pursuant to his answer of 17 May 1999, *Official Report*, column *245*, if he will list *(a)* the dates on which claims were made, *(b)* the dates on which compensation was received, *(c)* the value of the compensation claimed and *(d)* the region in which the employee was working, for all claims since 1991 by former employees of British Rail who are diagnosed as having mesothelioma, asbestosis or primary carcinoma of the lung, related to exposure to asbestos. [84985]

Ms Glenda Jackson: I understand from the British Railways Board that information requested is not available in a form which can be analysed in the manner requested without disproportionate cost.

Water Companies

Mr. Kidney: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what powers his Department retains to ensure that the plans of the water companies for asset replacement are consistent with public safety. [84892]

Mr. Meale: The Government require water companies to operate in ways which are consistent with public safety through a variety of regulatory requirements, such as those concerned with health and safety at work and the quality of drinking water, rather than through control of their asset replacement policies.

The Director General of Water Services is required to exercise his powers and duties in the manner that he considers is best calculated to secure that the functions of water and sewerage undertakers are properly carried out as respects every area of England and Wales, and that undertakers are able to finance the proper carrying out of their functions.

The Deputy Prime Minister and Secretary of State for Wales have published "Raising the Quality", giving guidance to the Director General of Water Services on the environmental and quality obligations to be achieved by the water industry in England and Wales 2000–05. That guidance covered such public health matters as tackling deteriorating raw water quality and reducing the risk from cryptosporidium. Ministerial guidance has also been given in "Maintaining Public Water Supplies" on issues arising in the preparation of water resources plans by the water companies in England and Wales. The Director General will take this guidance into account in determining water company price limits in the current Periodic Review of water prices.

Ministers also have power, under Section 208 of the Water Industry Act 1991 to give directions to water undertakers covering emergencies and in the interests of national security.

Westminster City Council

Dr. Julian Lewis: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions, pursuant to his answer of 18 May 1999, *Official Report*, column *287*, concerning reviews by the Audit Commission of the District Auditor's investigation of Westminster City Council's designated sales, if he will list the reviews carried out. [85061]

Ms Armstrong: The Audit Commission considered reviews concerning the auditor's investigation into Westminster City Council's designated sales on two occasions in 1994, two occasions in 1995 and most recently in April 1996.

Birmingham Northern Relief Road

Dr. Tony Wright: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what plans he has to use his powers to regulate relative tolling levels in respect of the Birmingham Northern Relief Road. [85037]

Ms Glenda Jackson: There are no plans to do so. A statutory decision has been reached to change the basis on which the Birmingham Northern Relief Road (BNRR) has been promoted and authorised. The Decision Letter of 23 July 1997 followed a lengthy statutory process. In it the Secretary of State decided against modifying the BNRR toll order to prescribe a relationship between the tolling levels of different classes of vehicle. The Court of Appeal judgment of 23 March concluded that there was no requirement for the Secretary of State to impose restrictions on the relative level of tolls and, although he did have a power to do so, his statutory decision was perfectly valid.

Eyesight Standards

Mr. Jim Cunningham: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what assessment he has made of the *(a)* benefits and *(b)* disadvantages of exempting lorry and bus drivers from European Union eyesight standards. [85261]

Ms Glenda Jackson *[holding answer 24 May 1999]:* Drivers of lorries and buses (group 2) who obtained their licence since the implementation of the Second EC Driving Licence Directive on 1 January 1997, are subject to the Directive eyesight requirements.

Drivers of group 2 vehicles who obtained their licence before 1 January 1997, who are unable to meet the Directive eyesight requirements for such vehicles, but who can continue to meet the pre-Directive requirements, may renew their licence.

Drivers of group 2 vehicles who obtained their licence before 1 January 1997, who are unable to meet the pre-Directive requirements for such vehicles, but who can continue to meet the requirements applicable when they obtained their entitlement, may renew their licence provided that they have not been involved in a road accident in the preceding 10 years where defective eyesight was a contributory factor and that they have adequate recent experience of driving these vehicles. This has allowed drivers with a safe driving record over many years to retain their employment.

We have no evidence that preserved rights for these drivers have had an adverse effect on road safety.

Road Safety Strategy

Mr. Jim Cunningham: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions when the Road Safety Strategy will be published; and what representations he has received on the inclusion of casualty reduction targets. [85262]

Ms Glenda Jackson *[holding answer 24 May 1999]:* It is intended to publish the road safety strategy and targets in Autumn 1999 in order to reflect the findings of the review of speed policy announced in chapter 3 of the Government's Transport White Paper "A New Deal for Transport: Better for Everyone".

We consulted widely in 1997 on options for possible casualty reduction targets. There was an overwhelming response in favour of such targets. The road safety strategy will include targets for casualty reduction for 2010.

Road Fatalities

Mr. Jim Cunningham: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions how many road fatalities there were among *(a)* cyclists and *(b)* pedestrians in (i) Coventry, (ii) the United Kingdom and (iii) each EU member state in the last year for which figures are available. [85259]

Ms Glenda Jackson *[holding answer 24 May 1999]:* The information requested is shown in the following table.

	Pedal cyclists killed 1997	*Pedestrians killed 1997*
Coventry	1	5
United Kingdom	187	1,010
Austria	66	156
Belgium	122	142
Denmark	65	87
Finland	61	69
France	348	982
Germany	679	1,147
Greece	n/a	n/a
Irish Republic	24	130
Italy	429	894
Luxembourg[1]	2	7
Netherlands	240	119

	Pedal cyclists killed 1997	Pedestrians killed 1997
Portugal	75	624
Spain	116	960
Sweden	42	74

[1] 1996 figures

Sources:

OECD—International Road traffic Accident Database for EU data.
DETR, DOE (NI)—for UK data.

Peat Working Group

Caroline Flint: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will report on the work of the Peat Working Group. [85436]

Mr. Raynsford: The Peat Working Group was convened in 1997 to review existing planning policies for the provision of peat and alternative materials, and to advise the Government of the need, or otherwise, for change. It will report shortly, and we will consider arrangements for the publication of its findings.

Shipping Services Directive

Mr. Olner: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will make a statement on his Department's support for full implementation of EU Directive 94/57 on the freedom to provide classification and other shipping services; and what progress has been made by EU member states in implementing this Directive. [85307]

Ms Glenda Jackson: The UK supports full implementation of Council Directive 94/57/EC and expects other Member States to do likewise. I understand that all Member States have transposed the Directive into their national legislation.

Energy Efficiency Schemes

Mr. Alan Simpson: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions (1) what estimate he has made of the average change in the proportion of income spent on heating by households who receive home improvements under the *(a)* new home energy efficiency schemes and *(b)* new home energy efficiency Plus schemes; [85469]

(2) what estimate he has made of the percentage of households receiving assistance under the *(a)* new home energy efficiency schemes and *(b)* new home energy efficiency Plus schemes which will be removed from his Department's definition of fuel poverty. [85470]

Mr. Meale: The definition of a fuel poor household applied by academics and organisations active in the sector is one which needs to spend in excess of 10 per cent. of household income in order to achieve a satisfactory indoor heating regime (21°C in the living room and 18°C in the other occupied rooms).

We estimate that the assistance provided under the proposed new home energy efficiency scheme (HEES) and new HEES Plus will reduce the cost of heating an average 3 bedroom semi-detached house to the required standard by between £600 and £1,000 depending on the energy efficiency of the property prior to improvement. Due to the vast large variety of combinations of dwelling type, size, heating and level of insulation, we are not at this stage able to estimate what would be the average improvement under either new HEES or new HEES Plus. For the same reason we are not able to estimate what would be the average improvement in terms of the standard assessment procedure.

The intention of new HEES and new HEES Plus will be to move households out of fuel poverty and we expect to substantially achieve that. The main exception will be those few households (1 per cent. or less) who are eligible for new HEES and live in properties that are both semi-detached/detached and use on-peak electricity or smokeless solid fuel. The size and type of these properties combined with the cost of the fuel used make it difficult to move these households entirely out of fuel poverty. Our consultation paper seeks comments on the best package to assist these households.

Mr. Alan Simpson: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what estimate he has made of (i) the number of homes to be improved, (ii) what the average new grant will be and (iii) the average improvement in terms of the standard assessment procedure rating of homes under the *(a)* new home energy efficiency schemes and *(b)* new home energy efficiency plus schemes. [85468]

Mr. Meale: We estimate that in the first two years, 2000–01 and 2001–02, the new home energy efficiency scheme (HEES) will assist some 200,000 households, with the average value of grant assisted work being £400 per household.

Over the same period, we estimate that new HEES Plus will assist a further 300,000 low income over-60's households, with the average value of grant assisted work being £700 per household. We are carrying out further work in order to refine these estimates.

Mr. Alan Simpson: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions (1) what proportion of the expenditure announced in "Fuel Poverty: The New Home Energy Efficiency Schemes" to alleviate fuel poverty will be allocated to *(a)* England, *(b)* Scotland and *(c)* Wales; [85471]

(2) how many of the households included in the *(a)* new home energy efficiency plus schemes and *(b)* new home energy efficiency schemes will be in (i) England, (ii) Scotland and (iii) Wales; [85472]

(3) how much money is available to be spent on new home energy efficiency schemes and new home energy efficiency plus schemes in the next two years; and what proportion of this will be spent on *(a)* grants to households and *(b)* administration and other costs. [85467]

Mr. Meale: Over 2000–01 and 2001–02, we have allocated a total of £300 million to tackling fuel poverty through energy efficiency improvements. Since this will be a devolved function, we shall shortly consider the most appropriate method of dividing the moneys between the proposed new home energy efficiency scheme (HEES) in England and the separate programmes in Scotland and Wales, taking account of the extent of fuel poverty in each.

We estimate that some 7.7 million households in England will be eligible for assistance under either new HEES or new HEES Plus. In 1996 we estimated that there

were between 4.3 million and 5.4 million fuel poor households in England. Our proposed criteria for eligibility therefore go wider than the definition of the fuel poor in order to reach all those households for whom the health risks from cold homes are the greatest.

Administrative costs will be kept as low as possible consistent with ensuring that the most vulnerable households are identified quickly and with ensuring the quality of the service provided. Costs will be determined ultimately by competitive tender. Under the existing scheme some administrative costs are included in installer charges and there is no obligation to target the most vulnerable households.

Advisory Group on Motorcycling

Dr. Starkey: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what issues were discussed at the first meeting of the Advisory Group on Motorcycling; when its next meeting will be held; and what procedures exist for members of the public to make representations to the Group. [85338]

Ms Glenda Jackson: The first meeting of the Advisory Group on Motorcycling identified key areas of concern to motorcyclists and other interested parties. These included the issues of training and licensing, safety and the environment. The Group will consider these and other issues to assist the Government in developing their policy on motorcycling.

The next meeting will take place on 21 July. It is open to members of the public to make representations to member organisations or, of course, direct to the Government, should they wish.

Dr. Starkey: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will list the membership of the Advisory Group on Motorcycling. [85337]

Ms Glenda Jackson: The membership of the Advisory Group on Motorcycling is:

National Motorcycle Council
British Motorcyclists Federation
Motorcycle Industry Association
Despatch Association
Motorcycle Retailers Association
Motorcycle Action Group
Motorcycle Rider Training Association
Automobile Association
Royal Automobile Club
Local Authority Road Safety Officers' Association
Association of London Borough Road Safety Officers
Association of Chief Police Officers
Local Government Association.

Safety Regulations (Riverside Sites)

Mr. John Cryer: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will make a statement on the nature and basis of the statutory regulations relating to safety in connection with repair or construction work on bridges and other structures over tidal water on the River Thames upstream of Gravesend, with particular reference to those applying to the specification of safety boats and the qualifications of their crews. [Transferred] [85306]

Mr. Meale: The safety of construction and repair workers at riverside sites, is covered by the Construction (Health, Safety and Welfare) Regulations 1996. They include measures to prevent falls, minimise the risk of drowning and to provide rescue equipment (but do not specify what type). The Regulations require the safe transport of workers by water, any vessel used shall be suitably constructed and properly maintained, under the control of competent person and not be overloaded. An inspector would take these factors into account when visiting a site.

The Maritime and Coastguard Agency can advise on appropriate standards for rescue and work boats which are used only on inland waters, but there are no specific merchant shipping regulations laying down standards for such boats or qualifications of those manning them.

The Port of London Authority (PLA) require boats carrying goods or up to 12 passengers to be licensed and operated by licensed watermen. The PLA is not empowered to insist on this for boats used solely as rescue boats, but can only advise. The most suitable craft for individual circumstances is best determined through a properly conducted risk assessment.

Local Government Reform

Mr. Burstow: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if local authorities that opt for area-based committees will be permitted to delegate executive functions to them under his proposals for local government reform. [85381]

Ms Armstrong: Having regard to the responses received to our Paper "Local leadership, local choice" (Command Paper 4298), we are considering how any legislation for new forms of local governance can allow decisions to be devolved to local areas whilst ensuring there will be clear corporate executive accountability in each council.

Concessionary Fares (London)

Mr. Burstow: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions, pursuant to his answer of 18 May 1999, *Official Report*, column *290*, concerning the London concessionary fares scheme, if he will table amendments in the House of Lords to extend the reserve scheme to include surface rail services. [85445]

Ms Glenda Jackson: The Greater London Authority Bill will provide adequate powers for London local authorities to deal satisfactorily with the provision of concessions on London rail services. We have always made clear that our general aim for the Greater London Authority Bill is to transfer existing responsibilities to the Mayor, rather than attempt major revisions of legislation affecting London going beyond the policies outlined in the White Paper. The creation of a new statutory reserve scheme including surface rail would not be compatible with that aim.

Canary Wharf

Mr. Sheerman: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what steps his Department is taking to ensure that Canary Wharf Developments restores the bridge between Canary Wharf and South Keys. [85458]

Mr. Caborn: My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State understands that the British Waterways Board is currently liaising with Canary Wharf Developments and various groups on the South Quay with the aim of putting in place a temporary footbridge while the existing bridge between Canary Wharf and South Quay is not in use.

Brownfield Land

Mr. Sheerman: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions (1) what estimate he has made of the amount of available brownfield land suitable for housing development; [85449]

(2) what estimate he has made of the amount of available brownfield land suitable for industrial development; [85450]

(3) what is his current estimate of the amount of available brownfield land suitable for retail development. [85457]

Mr. Raynsford: Provisional results from the National Land Use Database were published on 20 May. These show an estimate of 33,000 hectares of previously developed vacant and derelict land across England. Some 4,800 hectares of this land was allocated in local plans or had planning permission for housing, about 4,500 hectares for mixed use and around 13,400 for other uses. In total, just over 12,000 hectares of vacant and derelict land either had planning permission or were allocated in the local plan for housing or were judged suitable for housing. Suitability was not assessed for retail or industrial development.

The National Land Use Database also included sites currently in use but allocated in local plans for redevelopment or with planning permission for housing; other sites expected to become available for redevelopment; and sites occupied by vacant commercial buildings. Such sites accounted for an estimated 23,000 hectares, of which over 5,000 hectares were allocated for redevelopment in plans or had planning permission for housing and a total of over 14,000 hectares were judged suitable for housing.

A copy of the DETR/Government Statistical Service Bulletin has been placed in the House of Commons Library.

Urban Task Force Report

Mr. Sheerman: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions when he expects to receive the report from the Urban Task Force. [85455]

Mr. Caborn: The Deputy Prime Minister hopes to receive the final draft of the Task Force's report in the next few days. It will then be prepared for publication, which will be by the end of June.

Car Insurance

Mr. Sutcliffe: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what plans he has to strengthen the rules in relation to car insurance and the abuse of cover notes. [85309]

Ms Glenda Jackson: Increasing use of electronic delivery of services in the insurance industry is making abuse of cover notes more difficult. As the Government move to electronic direct relicensing of vehicles, including use of the Association of British Insurers planned motor insurance database, such abuse should be virtually eliminated because enforcement authorities will be able to have access to insurance information on-line in real time.

Anybody who had the misfortune to be the victim in an accident involving a driver abusing a cover note should be reassured that compensation would be paid by the Motor Insurers Bureau under the terms of the Uninsured Drivers Agreement.

Road Tax

Mr. Sutcliffe: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what steps he is taking to eliminate fraud through the abuse of road tax discs. [85308]

Ms Glenda Jackson: Vehicle excise duty (VED) fraud can take a number of forms. The display of fraudulent tax discs is a serious matter which is dealt with solely by the police. There is no evidence to suggest that the practice is widespread. Where vehicles are used or kept unlicensed on the public road, the detection role is carried out by the police, who pass offence reports to the Driver and Vehicle Licensing Agency for enforcement action.

My Department has introduced a number of new initiatives aimed at reducing the level of vehicle excise duty evasion. These include measures to improve the quality of the vehicle register and to make it more difficult for motorists to drop out of the licensing system. The national scheme to wheelclamp and impound unlicensed vehicles continues to be successful in encouraging motorists to relicense their vehicles. A pilot scheme to use camera technology for automating the detection process is to begin shortly.

Best Value in Housing Framework

Charlotte Atkins: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will make a statement about the recently completed consultation exercise on the best value in housing framework. [85628]

Ms Armstrong: On 21 January 1999 we published the consultation paper "Best Value in Housing Framework". This explained the framework within which local housing authorities will need to operate in obtaining best value in housing taking into account key housing aspects such as the relationship between best value and the Housing Investment Programme; the important role of tenants and residents; and the operation and establishment of the Housing Inspectorate.

The consultation paper flowed from the work of the Best Value in Housing Steering Group which brings together representatives from my Department; the Local Government Association; the Chartered Institute of

Housing; the Audit Commission; the Housing Corporation; the National Housing Federation; and TAROE—the Tenants and Residents Organisations of England. Consultation ended on 16 April 1999. We received 268 responses from across a wide range of local authorities, tenants organisations and housing professional bodies which will help inform the content of the final guidance.

I am pleased to announce that the consultation shows that there is strong support for the principles of best value in housing as set out in the consultation paper and, in particular, for the involvement of tenants and residents. There is also strong support for a protocol setting out the working relationships between the key organisations involved in assessing housing performance at the local level and compliance with the duty of best value. The consultation paper has been instrumental in raising awareness of best value among local authorities and others. Many local authority respondents indicated that they have found it a useful guide in helping them to prepare for best value.

In supporting the principles, a number of respondents raised resource, staffing and budgetary concerns relating to the implementation of best value. We accept that there are likely to be some compliance costs in areas such as best value reviews and performance plans. However, the intended purpose of the best value provisions is to secure continuous improvements in the way in which local government exercises its functions. The improved efficiency and effectiveness in the use of resources which result is expected to deliver cost savings as well as improvements in service delivery. To ensure efficiency, best value will be underpinned by rigorous audit, inspection and enforcement provisions. These will include the audit of the local authority performance plans as well as their accounts, which will include the costs of conducting reviews and preparing plans. The clear signal from the consultation is that we should proceed to work up a final set of guidance on the application of best value to housing. We aim to publish this towards the end of the year. The timing reflects the need to take account of the statutory arrangements to be put in place for best value.

In taking this work forward, through the Best Value in Housing Steering Group and others, we shall also want to take account of the detailed comments of respondents to the consultation exercise; further emerging lessons from the best value pilots; the read across to the work of the Housing Corporation in applying best value to registered social landlords; and the arrangements being developed by the Audit Commission for the operation and establishment of the Housing Inspectorate. Meanwhile, it is important that all local authorities, if they have not already done so, start planning ahead for best value. The new duty of best value, as laid down in Part I of the Local Government Bill, is expected to apply as from 1 April 2000.

I am placing a list of the respondents, excluding any who requested confidentiality, in the House Library together with a report providing an analysis of the responses. The list and specific responses are available in the Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions Library, Ashdown House, 123 Victoria Street, London SW1E 6DE, telephone 0171 890 3039.

CULTURE, MEDIA AND SPORT

Fair Trade Products

Ms Ward: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport what plans he has to introduce fair trade products at *(a)* meetings, *(b)* events and *(c)* catering facilities within his Department. [82869]

Janet Anderson: I refer my hon. Friend to the reply given by my hon. Friend the Economic Secretary on 5 May 1999, *Official Report,* column *410.*

Concessionary Television Licences

Mr. Gerrard: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport what representations he has received regarding proposals by the BBC to withdraw concessionary TV licences from sheltered accommodation. [84904]

Janet Anderson: We have received no such representations. The BBC has no power to amend the concessionary television licence scheme, nor has the Corporation submitted proposals for change to the Government or the BBC funding review panel. The Government have, however, received representations from Members of Parliament, local authorities and members of the public about the withdrawal of concessionary licences from sheltered accommodation which no longer meets the qualifying criteria for entitlement to the concession.

Radio Authority

Mrs. Brinton: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport who are *(a)* the auditors responsible for ensuring the financial propriety of the Radio Authority and *(b)* the authors of the report on allegations of impropriety in the award of radio licences by the Radio Authority. [85096]

Janet Anderson: The Radio Authority's internal auditors are PricewaterhouseCoopers. Its external auditors are Grant Thornton, whose Crawley office is responsible for the audit.

The authors of the independent report of the Inquiry into allegations concerning the award of the East of England regional licence were the Forensic Services Group of the London office of Grant Thornton.

Royal Opera House

Mr. Peter Ainsworth: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport what estimate he has made of the deficit at the Royal Opera House in (i) 1999–2000 and (ii) 2000–01. [85287]

Mr. Chris Smith *[holding answer 24 May 1999]:* If the Royal Opera House development appeal is successful in reaching its fund raising target, then the deficit at the Royal Opera House will have been eliminated by the end of the current financial year.

RADA

Mr. Peter Ainsworth: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport what discussions he has had

with the Arts Council regarding the finances of the Royal Academy of Dramatic Art; and if he will make a statement. [85288]

Mr. Chris Smith *[holding answer 24 May 1999]:* I have regular discussions with the Arts Council on a wide range of issues.

English Tourism Council

Mr. Peter Ainsworth: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport if he will publish the aims and objectives of the English Tourism Council. [85293]

Mr. Chris Smith *[holding answer 24 May 1999]:* On 14 December 1998 we announced in "A New Cultural Framework" that we would establish a new streamlined, more strategic body to support tourism in England. "Tomorrow's Tourism", the strategy we published in February gave further information on the role of the new body. On 27 April 1999, *Official Report*, columns *114–15*, I announced to the House that the body would be known as the English Tourism Council (ETC) and provide a further indication of the ETC's functions. We are working with the English Tourist Board on the detailed remit of the ETC and will be publishing aims and objectives as part of the launch of the ETC, which we expect to take place in July.

Mr. Peter Ainsworth: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport what steps his Department is taking to support the development of the English Tourism Council. [85295]

Mr. Chris Smith *[holding answer 24 May 1999]:* Officials in my Department are working very closely with staff at the English Tourist Board as work on the development of the English Tourism Council continues. As well as advice, we are providing funds of £2.8 million over two years to support the transition.

Broadcasting Standards Commission

Mr. Peter Ainsworth: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport when he last had discussions with the Broadcasting Standards Commission; and if he will make a statement about its future role in the regulation of taste, decency and impartiality. [85290]

Mr. Chris Smith *[holding answer 24 May 1999]:* I last met the members of the Broadcasting Standards Commission on 23 March. The Government completed their consultation on the future regulation of broadcasting and telecommunications earlier this year. We will report on the outcome, and set out our plans for developing regulation and the role of the BSC, in the near future.

Accommodation Rating Scheme

Mr. Peter Ainsworth: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport what funds have been allocated by his Department for the consumer marketing of the harmonised accommodation rating scheme. [85296]

Mr. Chris Smith *[holding answer 24 May 1999]:* The funding of £11.8 million allocated to the English Tourist Board last December represents an increase of £2.1 million from the previous year. The increase is to be used for transforming the ETB into the English Tourism Council and also recognises our desire for a successful consumer launch of the new harmonised accommodation rating schemes. In accordance with our funding agreement with the ETB and the recent "Report and Action Plan for Establishing a New National Body for Tourism in England", the ETB has budgeted £300,000 of its total Government allocation for the consumer launch, which it is planning in partnership with the AA and the RAC for this September.

Arts Council

Mr. Peter Ainsworth: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport if he will list the organisations which have received Arts Council stabilisation grants indicating the sums involved in each case; and what criteria the Council used in making its decisions on the allocation of the grants. [85298]

Mr. Chris Smith *[holding answer 24 May 1999]:* The Pilot Stabilisation Programme, launched by the Arts Council of England in September 1997, made financial awards to 14 organisations, including two consortiums and one interim award (to the English National Opera). The aim of the programme is to strengthen arts organisations creatively, managerially and financially by providing them with expert advice and financial resources, giving them the opportunity to put themselves on a more secure financial footing.

	£
Birmingham Repertory Theatre	5,773,000
Blackheath Concert Halls	1,150,000
Bournemouth Orchestras	3,182,000
Cinema City, Norwich	385,272
Embroiderers' Guild	485,301
English National Opera	[1]9,200,000
Hampshire Arts Centres Consortium	394,000
Inner City Music	530,260
The Junction, Cambridge	474,013
London Symphony Orchestra	868,000
Northern Sinfonia	1,691,781
Sheffield Museums and Galleries Consortium	1,098,377
Tara Arts Group	605,534
West Yorkshire Playhouse	2,645,000

[1] Two awards: October 1997 £4.5m and September 1998 £4.7m

The criteria used by the Arts Council were published at the time the scheme was originally announced.

Mr. Peter Ainsworth: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport how much of the Arts Council of England's grant in aid for the current year remains unallocated. [85289]

Mr. Chris Smith *[holding answer 24 May 1999]:* The Arts Council has allocated its budget in full, including making provision for flexible funding for new initiatives. Plans for these initiatives will be announced over coming weeks.

Mr. Peter Ainsworth: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport what discussions he has had with the Arts Council on improving the performance of their building monitors. [85291]

Mr. Chris Smith *[holding answer 24 May 1999]:* The National Audit Office published on 14 May its report on the Arts Council's monitoring of major capital projects, funded by the National Lottery, which covered the performance of building monitors. My officials have, of course, discussed with the Arts Council the content

of the report and ways of maintaining improvements in the performance of building monitors, and will continue to do so.

National Museums and Galleries

Mr. Peter Ainsworth: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport what plans he has to change the legal status of national museums and galleries; and if he will make a statement. [85292]

Mr. Chris Smith *[holding answer 24 May 1999]:* During the DCMS Comprehensive Spending Review, the National Museums Directors Conference expressed the wish for a more strategic relationship with Government through greater operational independence and flexibility.

Subsequently, DCMS Ministers have been considering various ways in which institutions might be given greater financial and managerial autonomy. Options might include improved public sector management, public/private partnerships or a change of legal status.

No decision has yet been reached in this matter.

Wembley Stadium

Mr. Peter Ainsworth: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport when site work on the redevelopment of Wembley Stadium will commence; and if he will make a statement. [85300]

Mr. Chris Smith *[holding answer 24 May 1999]:* Work on demolishing the existing stadium at Wembley is scheduled to begin in September 2000. Following acquisition of the stadium in March, my hon. Friend the Minister for Sport and I establish a committee with the key parties to monitor progress against the agreed programme.

World Cup (2006)

Mr. Stringer: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport how much money he has spent to date in support of England's bid to host the 2006 World Cup. [84990]

Mr. Banks *[holding answer 24 May 1999]:* The Football Association advise that, up to the end of 1998, they have spent £3,053,522 on the 2006 World Cup bid, from a budget of some £9.4 million.

Youth Council

Mr. Maclean: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport if he will publish the latest version of the agenda for the Youth Council of 27 May, prior to the meeting. [85082]

Mr. Mudie: I have been asked to reply

The latest version of the Agenda Youth Council of 27 May is as follows:

1. Adoption of the agenda.
2. Approval of list of A items.
3. Decision of the European Parliament and of the Council establishing a community single programme on Youth.
4. Presidential Memorandum "Youth and Europe-Our future".
5. Possible Community Communication concerning a proposal for a Decision on the implementation of measures aimed at combating sex tourism involving children.
6. Decision on community action on measure to prevent violence against children, young persons and women (the DAPHNE PROGRAMME).
7. Any other business.

PRIME MINISTER

Scottish Parliament

Dr. Fox: To ask the Prime Minister what guidance has been given to Ministers in replying to letters from Members of the Scottish Parliament on matters reserved under the Scotland Act 1998. [84910]

The Prime Minister *[holding answer 21 May 1999]:* Guidance on handling correspondence from Members of the Scottish Parliament—and from Members of the National Assembly for Wales and the Northern Ireland Assembly—will be issued to all Government Departments. Copies of the guidance will be placed in the Libraries of both Houses.

Cabinet Meetings

Mrs. Virginia Bottomley: To ask the Prime Minister, pursuant to his oral answer of 19 May 1999, *Official Report*, column 1060, if he will list the Cabinet meetings he has not attended; and for what reasons he did not rearrange those Cabinet meetings. [85438]

The Prime Minister: I refer the right hon. Member to the reply I gave to the hon. Member for Chesham and Amersham (Mrs. Gillan) on 30 April 1999, *Official Report*, column *281*.

Scottish Office Ministers

Dr. Fox: To ask the Prime Minister if he will list the responsibilities of each Scottish Office Minister after 1 July. [85434]

The Prime Minister: At 1 July Scottish Office Ministers will represent Scottish interests in reserved matters within the UK government, exercise certain specific responsibilities under the Scotland Act 1998, and be expected to promote good communications and relationships between the UK Parliament and Government and the Scottish Parliament and Executive.

EDUCATION AND EMPLOYMENT

Firearms Training

Mr. McNamara: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment if he will list the types of (i) public and (ii) private institution falling within his area of responsibility in which individuals aged under 18 years may be trained in the use of firearms; and if he will estimate the numbers of individuals receiving such training in each type of institution in each of the last five years. [81137]

Mr. Mudie *[holding answer 21 April 1999]:*

Schools

The only circumstances in which schools would have access to firearms training is through the Combined Cadet Forces and in a small number of schools with Home Office approved target-shooting clubs.

Further Education Colleges

Firearms training takes place in only five colleges of agriculture and horticulture. Students undertaking these courses would be doing so as part of courses in conservation or game keeping. In 1997–98, 63 students aged under 18 undertook this training.

Tuition Fees

Mr. Green: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment (1) how many extra Scottish resident students at United Kingdom universities would be exempted from paying university tuition fees if the income level below which tuition fees are not levied were raised by *(a)* £2,000 and *(b)* £4,000 per annum; [84059]

(2) how many extra United Kingdom students would be exempted from paying university tuition fees if the income level below which tuition fees are not levied were raised by *(a)* £2,000 and *(b)* £4,000 per annum. [84060]

Mr. Mudie *[holding answer 13 May 1999]:* It is estimated that an additional 5 per cent. of United Kingdom students would be exempted from paying tuition fees if the income level below which tuition fees are not levied were raised by £2,000; this figure would be 10 per cent. if the income level were raised by £4,000. The equivalent figures for Scottish domiciled students at United Kingdom universities are estimated to be 5 per cent. and 9 per cent.

Commonwealth Students

Mr. Cox: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment how many students currently studying in the UK from Commonwealth countries have received financial assistance from his Department towards the cost of their education studies in the UK in each of the last three years. [84742]

Mr. Mudie: The majority of scholarships for Commonwealth students are funded by the Foreign and Commonwealth Office and Department for International Development. While the Department of Education and Employment does not offer direct financial support to these students, the Overseas Research Students Awards Scheme (ORSAS), funded by the Higher Education Funding Council for England supported 822 students in the 1996–97 academic year at the cost of £3.792 million, 721 students in 1997–98 at £3.507 million and 709 students in 1998–99 at £3.713 million. In addition, the Montserrat Emergency Award Scheme, funded through the British Council, supported 6 students in 1997–98 and 92 students in 1998–99 academic year, with maintenance awards of £3,500 each per year.

Post-16 Education

Mr. Paul Marsden: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment if he will make a statement on the review of post-16 education. [84855]

Mr. Mudie: We are currently considering a range of options for delivering post-16 education and training, and will be presenting our proposals to Parliament in the summer.

Newly Qualified Teachers

Mr. Paul Marsden: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment if he will make a statement on the rules governing employment in sixth form colleges of newly qualified teachers. [84853]

Mr. Mudie: Newly qualified school teachers are free to take up employment in sixth form colleges. Such teachers do not have to serve a period of statutory induction until they wish to teach in a maintained school or a non-maintained special school.

A-Levels (Funding)

Mr. Paul Marsden: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment how much on average *(a)* a sixth form college and *(b)* an equivalent local education authority school receives annually for a student studying three A-levels annually. [84854]

Mr. Mudie: The Department has published the costs of a successful three A-level package, typically lasting two years, in "The Public Funding Costs of Education and Training for 16–19 year olds in England 1996–97". These costs were £7,380 and £5,910 for local education authority maintained school sixth forms and sixth form colleges respectively.

Jobseekers

Mr. Willetts: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment how much time is allowed to claimants in receipt of Jobseeker's Allowance who are parents to make child care arrangements in the event of them receiving the offer of a job. [85093]

Mr. Andrew Smith: A claimant in receipt of Jobseeker's Allowance (JSA) who has caring responsibilities is required to be able to take up employment within 48 hours. For JSA purposes, caring responsibilities include caring for a child who is either a close relative of the jobseeker or who is living in the same household as the jobseeker.

New Deal (Advisers)

Mr. Green: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what training is available for Employment Service Personal Advisers to New Deal trainees; and if he will make a statement. [84926]

Mr. Andrew Smith *[holding answer 21 May 1999]:* ES New Deal Personal Advisers receive up to 46 days training, specifically designed to help them deliver the New Deal. The type and duration of training varies depending on which particular New Deal individual Personal Advisers are delivering.

It includes training in interviewing, in work benefits and allowance payments, how to deal with special client groups and how to manage a case load of New Deal participants.

New Deal Personal Advisers are also given in depth information on how New Deal operates, what options are available to participants and what local provision is available to help prepare them for work.

Swimming Lessons

Mr. Jack: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment (1) what studies his Department has made on the effect on small schools of the new funding arrangements for swimming lessons; and if he will make a statement; [85141]

(2) what representations he has received from within the County of Lancashire about the effect on small schools of his Departments' new proposals for the funding of swimming lessons. [85142]

Mr. Charles Clarke: Under the Financing of Maintained Schools Regulations 1999, the cost of providing swimming lessons must be met from schools' delegated budgets. The Regulations allow local education authorities to include factors in their funding formulae to compensate schools for the cost of hiring "off-site" facilities (including swimming pools); formulae may also take account of the need for transport to and from such facilities. LEAs may also compensate small schools more generally for their diseconomies of scale. Within this framework, LEAs can enable small schools to maintain the provision of swimming lessons, at least on a scale sufficient to meet the needs of the National Curriculum.

Representations on the funding of swimming were made by Lancashire LEA in its response to the May 1998 consultation paper, "Fair Funding" and, subsequently, in the course of consultation on the Financing of Maintained Schools Regulations. The Department has been unable to trace any more recent representations on the subject from within Lancashire, with the exception of a letter from the hon. Member, a letter from my hon. Friend the Member for Morecambe and Lunesdale (Miss Smith) about the future of certain specific swimming pools in her constituency, and a letter on the same subject from a member of the public in Heysham.

Appraisals Handbook

Mrs. May: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment when he expects the Appraisals Handbook to be completed; and what action the Department will take to distribute it. [85373]

Mr. Charles Clarke: Consultation on the Green Paper proposals ended on 31 March. We plan to publish a Performance Management Framework later this year.

Mrs. May: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment if he will set out the tender specification for the contract to prepare the Appraisals Handbook, and the criteria used to determine the winning bid. [85374]

Mr. Charles Clarke: The tender specification for the contract to prepare the Appraisal Handbook was detailed in an advertisement in the Times Education Supplement on 6 February 1998. I am placing a copy of the advertisement and the tender specifications in Library.

Bids were assessed on the following criteria:

Contractors' capacity:

- to demonstrate an understanding of the policy context;
- to ensure outputs which would meet the Secretary of State's specification;
- to demonstrate that the scope of their organisation could ensure a credible outcome;
- to demonstrate that they had made suitable plans within the timescale to produce results;
- recent relevant experience in term of policy and project management.

Mrs. May: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment when the contract for the Appraisals Handbook was set; who were the bidders for the contract; who won the contract; and what is the cost of the contract. [85375]

Mr. Charles Clarke: The tender specification for the contract to prepare the Appraisal Handbook was set out in an advertisement in the Times Education Supplement on 6 February 1998. There were nine bidders, whom we are not able to name under the Code of Practice on Access to Government Information.

No bid was deemed to fully meet the tender specifications. Following further examination it was agreed to combine the best aspects of two bids. The resulting consortium consisted of Coopers and Lybrand/ Salter Baker & Associates (Education) Ltd. and Nottinghamshire LEA.

The information on the cost of the contract is commercial in confidence.

SOCIAL SECURITY

National Insurance Fund

Mr. Webb: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security if he will estimate the balance in the National Insurance Fund at the end of each of the next 10 years assuming *(a)* unchanged policies, *(b)* an increase in the basic state pension to £75 per week, *(c)* the implementation of his proposed reforms to SERPS, the state second pension and the stakeholder pension and *(d)* both (b) and (c) above. [84635]

Dawn Primarolo: I have been asked to reply.

Responsibility for the National Insurance Fund was transferred to the Treasury from 1 April 1999. In each tax year the Treasury is required to carry out a review of the general level of the National Insurance Fund with a view to determining whether a Treasury Grant is required or whether an order should be made varying the contribution rates for the following tax year. The aim is to ensure that a reasonable working balance is maintained in the Fund at the end of the year. The Government Actuary recommends that the minimum level of the National Insurance Fund at the end of the year should be equivalent to one-sixth of annual benefit payments for the year. The future balances in the National Insurance Fund will be subject to these annual reviews and the information requested could be provided only at disproportionate cost.

Pensioner Incomes

Mr. Webb: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security if he will estimate the proportion of pensioner households headed by a person aged *(a)* 65 to 69, *(b)* 70 to 74, *(c)* 75 to 79 and *(d)* 80 years or more who are (i) in receipt of income support and (ii) in receipt of any means-tested benefit, on a basis consistent with his estimate that one in four of all pensioner households are in receipt of income support. [84756]

Mr. Timms: The information is not available in the format requested. Such information as is available is in the table.

Pensioners in receipt of income-related benefits

Percentage

Age	*Proportion of pensioners receipt of Income Support*	*Proportion of pensioners in receipt of any means-tested benefit*
65–69	12	26
70–74	12	31
75–79	16	39
80 and over	25	42

Notes:

1. 'Pensioners' refers to pensioner benefit units, which represents a single person, or a couple where one or both partners is in the age group specified.
2. The figures are consistent with the estimate that one in five of all pensioner benefit units are in receipt of Income Support.
3. The estimates of benefit caseloads group pensioner couples according to the age of the oldest member of the couple. Population estimates by benefit unit classify couples according to the age of the male member of the couple. The estimated proportions are therefore based on the assumption that the male partner is the oldest.
4. Figures exclude cases in residential care and nursing homes.
5. Percentages are rounded to the nearest 1 per cent.
6. Means-tested benefits refer to Income Support, Family Credit, Disability Working Allowance, Housing Benefit and Council Tax Benefit.
7. Overlaps between recipients of more than one of these benefits have been removed.

Sources:

1. Income Support Quarterly Statistical Enquiry May 1998.
2. Disability Working Allowance 100 per cent. count of claims.
3. Family Credit 5 per cent. sample of awards.
4. Housing Benefit Management Information Systems, annual 1 per cent. sample inquiries, May 1998.
5. GAD 1996 population projections by marital status.

Social Security Act 1998

Mr. Gareth R. Thomas: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security when the decision making and appeals provisions of the Social Security Act 1998 will come into effect; and if he will make a statement. [85653]

Angela Eagle: In March I laid the main Regulations relating to the new system for handling decisions and appeals in benefits and child support being established under last year's Social Security Act. In addition this week I am making the Social Security Act 1998 (Commencement No 7 and Consequential and Transitional Provisions) Order 1999 which commences the relevant parts of the Act for introducing the new system for child support from 1 June. The Order also makes associated transitional and consequential provisions. Further Commencement Orders relating to benefits will be made in due course.

The new arrangements are a significant further step to modernise the delivery of Social Security and child support as part of the reform of welfare. The current system has to change. It is confusing for claimants and staff. Correcting mistakes is complicated and frequently claimants have to appeal. Even where they have no reasonable prospect of success, appeals currently take an average of seven months to be cleared.

The new system will enable the Benefits Agency, Child Support Agency and Employment Service to give a more helpful and accessible service. It will also help to tackle delays in the handling of appeals. Decisions will, as now, be based on the facts and the law, with the right of appeal to an independent tribunal. Decisions will be clearer and communications to the public are being simplified. There will be new arrangements for handling disputes, so mistakes can be corrected without the need for an appeal. Appeal tribunals will comprise one, two or three members according to the issues raised by the appeal, and there will be new arrangements for handling appeals which have no reasonable prospect of success.

To ensure service to the public is maintained during the transition period, the new system will come into operation in stages as follows:

Date	
1 June 1999	Child Support
5 July 1999	Child Benefit Guardians Allowance Industrial Injury Scheme Benefits
6 September 1999	Retirement Pension Widows Benefit Incapacity Benefit Severe Disablement Allowance Maternity Allowance
5 October 1999	Working Families Tax Credit Disabled Persons Tax Credit
18 October 1999	Jobseeker's Allowance Disability Living Allowance Attendance Allowance Invalid Care Allowance Vaccine Damage Payments
29 November 1999	Income Support Social Fund

The Chief Executives of the Agencies will be fully accountable to Parliament for the quality of decision making in their Agencies.

In addition, while appeal tribunals will continue to be independent, in April 2000 a new Appeals Service Agency will be established in this Department to be responsible for appeals administration. From 1 June, in a period of shadow working before the agency is launched, responsibility for the administration of appeals will be transferred from the President, Judge Harris, to the Chief Executive designate of the Appeals Service, Neil Ward. Benefit claimants and child support clients will receive information about the new arrangements in notifications and other letters from the Agencies as their cases are handled.

Income Support

Ms Harman: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security if an employed lone mother in receipt of working families tax credit whose pay is stopped when taking parental leave under the provisions of the Employment Relations Bill, will be eligible to claim income support. [84983]

Angela Eagle: A lone mother who is on parental leave will be able to claim Income Support if she meets the entitlement conditions. This applies whether or not she is in receipt of Working Families Tax Credit.

Ms Harman: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security if an employed individual in a two-parent couple in receipt of working families tax credit, whose pay is stopped when taking parental leave under the provisions of the Employment Relations Bill, will be able to claim income support. [84984]

Angela Eagle: Either member of the couple will be able to claim Income Support for the family when on unpaid parental leave if they meet the entitlement conditions. This applies whether or not the family is in receipt of Working Families Tax Credit.

Lone Parents (Benefits)

Mr. Hope: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what action he has taken to correct the benefit position whereby a number of lone parents receiving incapacity benefit or severe disability allowance have not received the full increase in their benefits from April. [85652]

Mr. Darling: A small number of lone parents in receipt of these benefits have, through an error in the regulations, failed to receive the full increase in benefit rates this year. We took swift action and introduced amendments to the regulations which became effective on 17 May. Those affected will have their payments corrected automatically, including any arrears from April.

DEFENCE

UK Ambassador (NATO)

Mr. Llew Smith: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will set out the responsibilities of the United Kingdom Ambassador's to NATO in respect of miliary operations conducted by NATO. [84762]

Mr. Tony Lloyd: I have been asked to reply.

The United Kingdom Permanent Representative on the North Atlantic Council, established by Article 9 of the North Atlantic Treaty, represents the United Kingdom in the Council on all matters including military operations.

Aircraft Carriers

Mr. Hancock: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what studies he has carried out into the use of nuclear steam-generating plant on future aircraft carriers; which organisations were consulted; and what conclusions were reached. [78778]

Mr. Spellar: Concept studies involving the MOD and UK industry have investigated a number of propulsion options for the future aircraft carriers, including nuclear power. Nuclear propulsion for the two ships has been discounted on cost-effectiveness grounds.

Mine Countermeasures Vessels

Mr. Hancock: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if the ships which were originally in the Mine Countermeasures vessels upgrade programme will remain in Royal Naval service for their projected service life. [84520]

Mr. Spellar: As we announced in the Strategic Defence Review, we have concluded that the number of Mine Countermeasures vessels should be limited to 22, rather than 25 as previously planned. No decisions have yet been taken as to which vessels will be disposed of. A decision is expected later this year. On current plans the remaining vessels, including those upgraded with Sonar 2193, will remain in service for their projected service lives.

Mr. Hancock: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence (1) what was the planned cost over what period of time of the upgrade programme for all Mine Countermeasure Vessels; [84519]

(2) when the decision to delay the upgrade of Royal Navy Mine Countermeasure Vessels was taken; and for what reasons; [84517]

(3) when those companies which had been invited to tender for the upgrade programme for Mine Countermeasure Vessels were informed of the delay in the programme; how this was done; and by whom. [84569]

Mr. Spellar: This is a matter for the Chief Executive of the Defence Procurement Agency. I have asked the Chief Executive to write to the hon. Member.

Letter from Sir Robert Walmsley to Mr. Mike Hancock, dated 25 May 1999:

I am replying to your questions to the Secretary of State for Defence about the programme to upgrade the Royal Navy's Mine Countermeasure Vessels. This matter falls within my area of responsibility as Chief Executive of the Defence Procurement Agency.

The decision to delay the upgrade of the Royal Navy Countermeasure Vessels was made in the context of the Department's annual budget setting process which was completed in March 1999. The process takes account of cost, operational and industrial factors, and priorities are assessed on the basis of the Defence Missions and Tasks defined in the Strategic Defence Review (Cm 3999) published in July 1998. I can confirm that competing companies (Lockheed Martin and Thomson Marconi Sonar) were formally notified of the delay to the programme by letter on 24 March 1999.

I am afraid that I am unable to disclose the information you request on the cost of the programme as its disclosure could prejudice the competitive position of the Department in negotiations with contractors. I am therefore withholding this information under exemption 7 of the Code of Practice on Access to Government Information.

Sonar 2193 Programme

Mr. Hancock: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence when he expects to make a decision about the Sonar 2193 programme; and what plans he has for its role in Royal Naval service. [84518]

Mr. Spellar: On current plans, we expect to place a contract for the Sonar 2193 upgrade programme by mid-2001. The sonar upgrade will be introduced into service in 2003, and will improve the minehunting performance of the HUNT Class mine countermeasures vessels. In particular it will enhance their effectiveness against modern, stealthy mines.

Royal Fleet Auxiliary

Mr. Hancock: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence (1) what is the *(a)* target in service date for the replacements for (i) RFA Sir Geraint and (ii) RFA Sir Percivale and *(b)* the planned capacity of the replacements; [84510]

(2) what is the target date for completion of the replacements for RFA *(a)* Sir Geraint and *(b)* Sir Percivale; [84509]

(3) when RFA Sir Geraint and RFA Sir Percivale will be taken out of service; and what is the target date for the contract to be let for their replacement. [84522]

Mr. Spellar: This is a matter for the Chief Executive of the Defence Procurement Agency. I have asked the Chief Executive to write to the hon. Member.

Letter from Sir Robert Walmsley to Mr. Mike Hancock, dated 25 May 1999:

I am replying to your questions to the Secretary of State for Defence about the Alternative Landing Ships Logistic (ALSL) programme to replace RFAs SIR GERAINT and SIR PERCIVALE. This matter falls within my area of responsibility as Chief Executive of the Defence Procurement Agency.

The ALSLs will be required to transport and deliver troops, vehicles and stores as integral elements of an amphibious task force off-loaded at sea to landing craft. Options for the capacity of these new vessels will be dependent on the designs offered by industry in their bids, but we expect each vessel to embark between 350 and 500 military personnel and to have between 500 and 1000 lane metres of capacity.

We plan to place the contract for the ALSLs in mid 2000 with a target date for completion of the two vessels (defined as the Contract Acceptance Date) of Summer 2003 and early 2004 respectively. The planned in service dates are early 2004 and Autumn 2004. Full passenger certification for RFAs SIR GERAINT and SIR PERCIVALE will expire in 2003 and 2004, but they will continue to operate as logistic support ships until they are replaced by the new ALSLs.

Open Government

Mr. Llew Smith: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence, pursuant to his answer to the right hon. Member for South Shields (Dr. Clark) of 10 May 1999, *Official Report*, column *21*, if he will make a statement on the nature of those applications made to his Department for disclosure of information under the open Government Code of Practice on Access to Government Information which were not granted for 1998. [84859]

Mr. Spellar: For central monitoring purposes, the total number of applications made under the Code and the number of requests which were refused are collected, but not details of the reasons for non-disclosure of information. This information could be provided only at disproportionate cost. Each request for information under the Code of Practice on Access to Government Information is considered on a case-by-case basis. Departmental instructions made it clear that decisions to withhold information must be approved by a member of the Senior Civil Service or equivalent military rank, and that reasons for non-disclosure must be made in terms of the Code's exemptions.

Royal Air Force Signals Engineering Establishment Agency

Ms Walley: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what key targets have been set for the Royal Air Force Signals Engineering Establishment Agency for the financial year 1999–2000. [85604]

Mr. Doug Henderson: The Royal Air Force Signals Engineering Establishment Agency's key targets for the financial year 1999–2000 are:

Operational Strategy

Key Target 1—Deliver 100 per cent. of Operational Tasks to time.

Key Target 2—Deliver at least 92 per cent. of Operational Support Tasks to time.

Performance Strategy

Key Target 3—Achieve a quality failure rate for completed tasks of less than 1.5 per cent.

Financial Strategy

Key Target 4—Reduce the full cost per task hour to below 85 per cent. of the FY96–97 figure in real terms.

Kosovo

Mr. Keith Simpson: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what plans he has to use the TA to replace regular army units currently stationed in Germany but warned to deploy to Kosovo. [85378]

Mr. George Robertson: There are no current plans to use the TA to replace regular Army units currently stationed in Germany but warned to deploy to Kosovo.

TRADE AND INDUSTRY

Export Licences

Mr. Reed: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry if he will list those Governments who received a licence to export UK surplus military equipment in (i) 1997 and (ii) 1998. [83007]

Mr. Spellar: I have been asked to reply.

The major capital surplus exports on a Government to Government basis were as follows:

Year	
1996–97	
Brazil	Type 22 frigates
Uruguay	Wessex helicopters and spare equipment
Australia	Sea King helicopters
Malta	Vehicles
Austria	MS78 light armoured vehicles and spares
1997–98	
Brazil	Type 22 frigates
Uruguay	Wessex helicopters
Philippines	Peacock Class Hong Kong patrol craft

Gas-fired Power Stations

Mr. Redwood: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what is the total capacity of the new gas-fired power stations approved since May 1997; and if he will estimate the amount of coal-use they will displace. [84360]

Mr. Byers: Some 4 GW of new gas-fired capacity has been cleared since May 1997. This compares to some 23 GW of new gas-fired capacity cleared by the previous Government. In broad terms each extra 1 GW of new gas-fired capacity could displace coal burn by about 2.5 million tonnes a year. The precise impact, however, is not so simple since displacement in a particular case depends on the mode of operation, the competitive position of other plant (which may be coal or non-coal plant) and the level of demand that is required to be met.

Photo-voltaic Generation

Dr. Whitehead: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry (1) what discussions he has conducted with *(a)* the Electricity Regulator and *(b)* the electricity supply industry concerning the practice of requiring separate meters to record the supply and consumption of electricity by domestic premises where photo-voltaic generating capacity has been installed; [84319]

(2) what discussions he has conducted with *(a)* the Electricity Regulator and *(b)* the electricity supply industry concerning the current pricing arrangements for purchasing electricity generated by photo-voltaic installations in domestic premises. [84320]

Mr. Battle: Renewable sources, including photo-voltaic (PV) installations, have an important contribution to make to the development of sustainable energy supplies in the UK. It is important that renewables and other forms of embedded generation can compete on a level playing field. My Department's New and Renewable Energy Programme has supported a number of studies, involving both renewable generating companies and the electricity supply industry, with the aim of encouraging the development of commercial and technical frameworks that will assist them to compete on an equal footing.

In addition, "New and Renewable Energy: Prospects for the 21st Century", the consultation paper which I published on 30 March, invited comments on issues surrounding the connection of embedded renewable generators to the electricity system. I will consider what further action may be required in the light of that consultation.

Metering is of course an essential component of a competitive market. It is important however, that metering arrangements do not discriminate between alternative sources or impose excessive costs. I understand that, while all generators are required to measure their exports and imports separately, for the very smallest sources (those below 100kW), such as domestic PV systems, a simpler system of metering is required.

I would encourage those who wish to see changes in the existing arrangements for metering or trade in PV or other types of embedded generation to take this up with the Director General of Electricity Supply at their earliest opportunity, and I will take a close interest in the outcome of those discussions.

UKAEAC

Mr. McNulty: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry if he will publish the results of the recent inspection of the United Kingdom Atomic Energy Authority Constabulary by Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Constabulary. [85606]

Mr. Battle: I understand that the full text of the report by Her Majesty's Inspector of Constabulary, Mr. Colin Smith, is being published today by the United Kingdom Atomic Energy Constabulary's Policy Authority. This is the first time that an inspection report on the UKAEAC has been published, and I welcome this commitment to increased openness. I have arranged for copies to be placed in the Library of the House.

I am pleased to note that the Inspector formed a good opinion of the professionalism of the men and women who police our nuclear installations. His report acknowledges the considerable modernisation in the force's management and general effectiveness brought about in recent years by the former and current Chief Constables.

The report makes 14 recommendations for improvements primarily on a range of management, training, communications and personnel issues, all of which the Chief Constable and Police Authority are committed to implementing.

Post Office

Mr. Fallon: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry if he will list the commercial acquisitions made by the Post Office since 1 November 1998, giving the approximate value of each acquisition and the date in which approval was given. [85345]

Mr. Ian McCartney: The commercial acquisitions made by the Post Office since 1 November 1998 are as follows:

Germany:

German Parcel—acquisition cost around £300 million

Der Kurier—acquisition cost less than £10 million

Austria:

Delacher—acquisition cost less than £3 million.

Government approval for the German Parcel acquisition was given to the Post Office on 19 December 1998. The other deals fell within permitted borrowing limits for smaller development investments which are notified to Government but do not require specific approval. Fuller details of the arrangements will be set out in the forthcoming White Paper.

AGRICULTURE, FISHERIES AND FOOD

BSE Inquiry

Mr. McNamara: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food if he will make a statement on the progress of the BSE Inquiry. [85506]

Mr. Nick Brown: The BSE Inquiry was originally intended to report on 31 December 1998. At the request of the Inquiry, my right hon. Friend the Member for Copeland (Dr. Cunningham), the previous Minister of

Agriculture, Fisheries and Food, announced on 9 March 1998, *Official Report*, column *3*, that the original terms of reference would be revised to allow the Inquiry until 30 June 1999 to report. The Inquiry has now requested a further extension and, following discussions with the Committee about the time needed to complete their task, the Government have agreed that the Report shall be delivered by 31 March 2000.

Meat Hygiene Service (Charges)

Mr. Drew: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food how many complaints he has received over meat hygiene service charges since April 1998. [85131]

Mr. Rooker: Since April 1998, my Department has received over 500 representations about hygiene inspection charges and the proposal to introduce charges for Specified Risk Material controls. In the same period, the Meat Hygiene Service has also received in excess of 100 representations about the level of its charges.

Date-based Export Scheme

Mr. Drew: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what proposals he has made to improve participation within the Date-Based Export Scheme. [85132]

Mr. Rooker: I expect uptake of the Date-based Export Scheme (DBES) to be low initially. The condition under which exports may resume are very strict: we can only change them in further negotiations and it is the Government's view that we must first show that we can operate the scheme as it stands. There are a few slaughterhouses which want to participate. My officials have been discussing with these slaughterhouses how the scheme might work for them, and will talk with any others which are interested. After we have seen and considered the report of Commission's April inspection of our DBES procedures, we will be writing to the slaughterhouses with details of the Scheme and an invitation to apply for participation or further information.

Hormone-treated Beef

Mr. Drew: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what progress is being made through the WTO to end the dispute with the USA and Canada over hormones in beef. [85134]

Mr. Rooker: On 17 May the General Affairs Council called on the European Commission to intensify its contacts with the USA and Canada on all aspects of the dispute concerning hormonal growth promoters and, in particular, to enter into detailed and transparent discussions on the basis of the scientific evidence available.

HEALTH

NHS Direct and Walk-in Clinics

Jackie Ballard: To ask the Secretary of State for Health to what extent clinical governance guidelines will apply to *(a)* walk-in clinics and *(b)* NHS Direct. [84371]

Mr. Denham: We will ensure that walk-in centres will be subject to appropriate clinical governance guidelines. The responsibility for ensuring this is achieved will depend on the nature of the organisation which takes responsibility for running the centre. NHS Direct will be subject to current clinical governance guidelines.

Cancer Treatments

Mr. Paul Marsden: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will list for each health authority the capital spend for projects relating to cancer treatment in the last 12 months. [84418]

Mr. Hutton: National Health Service Regional Offices do monitor large capital projects, but the information they have on capital spend is not disease specific. In many cases, a building or a piece of equipment will not be used solely for cancer patients and it is therefore not possible to provide the information requested.

Private Medical Insurance

Mr. Forth: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what estimate he has made of the effect of abolition of private medical insurance tax relief on demand for public healthcare. [84659]

Mr. Denham: It was anticipated that there would be no significant cost to the National Health Service of people withdrawing from private medical insurance schemes and seeking NHS treatment through changes to tax relief.

Guild Community Trust

Mr. Evans: To ask the Secretary of State for Health (1) what *(a)* discussions and *(b)* correspondence he has had with the non-executive directors of the Guild Community Trust, Preston; [84704]

(2) what discussions he has had with *(a)* the authors of and *(b)* others about the Galbraith/Campbell report relating to the Guild Community Trust, Preston; [84705]

(3) what steps he is taking to ensure that more *(a)* openness and *(b)* accountability is introduced into the governance of NHS trusts; [84708]

(4) what steps he is taking to encourage non-executive directors of NHS trusts to bring to his attention any mismanagement within the trust; [84709]

(5) when he expects to appoint a permanent Chairman of the Guild Community Trust, Preston; [84706]

(6) what *(a)* discussions and *(b)* correspondence he has had concerning the appointments of the non-executive directors of the Guild Community Trust, Preston; [84707]

(7) when he read the Galbraith/Campbell report relating to the Guild Community Trust, Preston; and what assessment he has made of its findings; [84711]

(8) what *(a)* discussions he has had and *(b)* advice he has received from the North West Regional Office concerning the appointments of the current non-executive directors of the Guild Community Trust, Preston. [84710]

Mr. Dobson *[holding answer 18 May 1999]:* After considering the independent reports into the management of the Guild Community National Health Service Trust and discussions with National Health Service Executive

Regional Office officials, I concluded that relations between non-executive directors of the Trust had reached a state of irretrievable breakdown and that it would not be in the best interests of the NHS or the Trust and, most of all, the community it is supposed to serve, for them to continue in office. I therefore asked all five remaining non-executive directors to resign . Two agreed to do so and I exercised my powers under Regulation 9(3) of the National Health Service Trust (Membership and Procedure) Regulations 1990 to terminate the membership of the remaining three who refused to resign.

I have appointed Mrs. Christine Kirk to chair the trust until 30 November 1999. Mrs. Kirk was appointed by the previous Government to chair the Calderstones NHS Trust. I have appointed five new non-executive directors for a four year period. They are:

Mr. P. Farrer

Mrs. A. Knowles

Mrs. G. Pashley

Mr. P. Passi

Mrs. H. Anslow.

None of these have any declared party political affiliations. The selection panels which chose them had some members with declared party political activity. Of these all were Conservative. These appointments were carried out in accordance with the guidelines of the Commissioner for Public Appointments and she has been kept informed at all stages of the problems at the Guild Community NHS Trust, the resignations, dismissals and appointments.

The openness and accountability of NHS trusts has been extended by the present Government, for example by requiring the trust boards to meet in public.

Organophosphates

Mr. Gill: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what plans he has to inform GPs of the outcome of the Edinburgh study into organophosphates. [84906]

Ms Jowell: The report of this study has not yet been completed. We understand that the report is likely to be finalised over the next few weeks and will then be published. The report will be submitted for urgent consideration by the Government's expert advisory committees.

Children's Wards

Mr. Cox: To ask the Secretary of State for Health which hospitals covering the Greater London area have children's wards. [85083]

Mr. Hutton: 40 National Health Service trusts within the London Regional Office area have children's wards. These can be broken down into the following sectors:

37 NHS trusts have acute children's wards;

6 NHS trusts have mental illness children's wards;

1 NHS trust has a learning disability children ward.

Note:

(1997–98 figures). Some NHS Trusts have more than one type of children's ward, hence the sector breakdown is higher than the total.

Nurses' Pay

Mr. Brady: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will list those NHS trusts which did not pay the increased pay award to nurses in their pay packets for April 1999. [85372]

Mr. Denham: The information requested is not available centrally.

I refer the hon. Member to the reply I gave him on 18 May 1999, *Official Report*, column *321*.

Care Guidance

Mr. Burstow: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what steps he plans to take to ensure that his Department's work on devising fair access to care guidance is integrated with work on charging policies. [85382]

Mr. Hutton: As promised in the Social Services White Paper we are drafting guidance to help authorities apply eligibility criteria more consistently, thus ensuring fairer access to care services around the country. We will be involving local authorities and other agencies as well as users and carers in working up this guidance, and will ensure that it properly takes account of other relevant policy development including any changes to the charging system.

Epsom and St. Helier NHS Trust

Mr. Burstow: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what estimate he has made of *(a)* the current financial position of the Epsom and St. Helier NHS Trust and *(b)* the Trust's year end figures for 1999–2000; and if he will make a statement. [85383]

Mr. Denham: The financial plans of health authorities and NHS trusts for financial year 1999–2000 have not yet been finalised.

NHS Trusts

Mr. Jack: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will list the responsibilities of non-executive directors of NHS trusts. [85143]

Mr. Denham: The responsibilities are set out in the information pack sent to all potential candidates for appointment to National Health Service boards. Copies of the information pack have been placed in the Library.

Renal Services

Mr. Jack: To ask the Secretary of State for Health, pursuant to his answer of 4 May 1999, *Official Report*, column *352*, on renal services, what extra capital and revenue resources have been made available to the four health authorities in Lancashire and South Cumbria to fund the 15 new dialysis stations. [85225]

Mr. Hutton: The £1.1 million capital investment comprises £300,000 from the North West regional capital programme and £800,000 from the capital programme of Preston Acute Hospitals National Health Services Trust. The health authorities will be responsible for meeting the revenue costs from their general allocations, beginning in 2000–01; these are estimated to be in the region of £1 million.

Dismissal (NHS Trusts)

Mr. Jack: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will list the grounds on which a non-executive director of an NHS trust can be dismissed from his post. [85144]

Mr. Denham: The grounds are listed in regulations 9(3) to 9(7) of the National Health Service Trusts (Membership and Procedure) Regulations 1990, as amended. Copies of the relevant Regulations are available in the Library.

Listening to Women

Mrs. May: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how many Listening to Women reply-paid cards have been printed; how many have been issued to *(a)* individual women and *(b)* women's organisations; and at what cost to date. [85376]

Ms Jowell: 1,250,000 reply-paid postcards were printed. 1,200,000 have so far been distributed to a range of sources to reach individual women and women's organisations. This includes Marks and Spencer; British Home Stores; Superdrug as well as the Women's National Commission; the Commission for Racial Equality; general practitioners surgeries; citizens advice bureaux; public libraries; post offices; bingo halls/cinemas, advice centres. In addition there have been personal requests from individuals and organisations.

The costs to date are £59,000 excluding Value Added Tax. The deadline for returning postcards ends on 30 June 1999.

Correspondence

Mr. Wyatt: To ask the Secretary of State for Health when the 13 letters beginning 20 August 1997 and ending 21 February 1999, sent to him by Mrs. Blee, a constituent of the hon. Member for Sittingbourne and Sheppey, will receive an answer. [85343]

Mr. Denham: Five letters have been received from Mrs. Blee since January 1998, the period when records are held. Of these, one was addressed direct to my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State and a response was sent on 20 August 1998.

Mr. Wyatt: To ask the Secretary of State for Health when the six letters from Mrs. Blee, a constituent of the hon. Member for Sittingbourne and Sheppey, sent between 29 October 1998 and 19 April 1999, addressed to the SE Regional Chairman, NHS Executive and the Chairman of West Kent Health Authority, will be answered. [85342]

Mr. Denham: There is no trace of any correspondence from Mrs. Blee.

The Regional Chairman of the South East Office of the NHS Executive and the Chairman of West Kent Health Authority have responded to all correspondence received from Mr. Alan Blee between 29 October 1998 and 19 April 1999.

Officials have confirmed that there is no trace of any correspondence received from Mrs. Blee.

CABINET OFFICE

Civil Servants (New Deal)

Fiona Mactaggart: To ask the Minister for the Cabinet Office how many people have been employed in the Civil Service under the New Deal for the young and unemployed. [85556]

Dr. Jack Cunningham: As at 1 April 1999, the information on Civil Service Departments (including their Agencies) participating as employers in the New Deal is as follows:

Main department name (including their agencies)	*New Deal 'starts' since programmes began* Age 18–24	25 and over	Total
Agriculture, Fisheries and Food	5	0	5
Cabinet Office	6	0	6
Culture, Media and Sport	0	1	1
Defence	5	2	7
Education and Employment	345	10	355
Environment, Transport and the Regions	5	1	6
Foreign and Commonwealth Office	3	0	3
Health	4	4	8
Home Office	1	0	1
International Development	0	0	0
Lord Chancellors	0	0	0
Northern Ireland Office	0	0	0
Scottish Office	13	0	13
Social Security[1]	18	0	18
Trade and Industry	21	1	22
HM Treasury	5	1	6
Welsh Office	4	1	5
Other:			
Charity Commission	5	0	5
Export Credits Guarantee Department	4	0	4
Government Offices for the Regions	3	0	3
Intervention Board	2	0	2
Totals	449	21	470

[1] Includes the Contributions Agency which transferred to the Inland Revenue on 1 April 1999

Public Appointments

Charlotte Atkins: To ask the Minister for the Cabinet Office what action he is taking to increase the representation of women, members of ethnic minority groups and disabled people on the boards of public bodies. [85607]

Mr. Kilfoyle: In June 1998, the Government launched a new initiative to increase the participation of under-represented groups in public life. Details of the Government's plan of action, including individual departmental plans, were published in "Quangos: Opening Up Public Appointments", copies of which are in the Libraries of the House.

The action plan has now been updated. This requires all Departments to continue their work towards the equal representation of women and men in public appointments, a pro-rata representation of members of ethnic minority groups, and the increased participation of disabled people in public life.

Individual departmental plans have also been updated and contain specific goals and objectives for the period 1999–2002. The revised plans are published today, and copies will be sent to all hon. and right hon. Members as well as being placed in the Libraries of the House. The plans will also be made available electronically on the Internet.

NORTHERN IRELAND

Aricept

Dr. Cable: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland what is the *(a)* number and *(b)* percentage of Alzheimer patients being treated with Aricept in Northern Ireland. [84878]

Mr. McFall: Information in the form requested is not available. The Central Services Agency, Northern Ireland, holds information on the drug Aricept in relation to prescriptions dispensed in Northern Ireland and this is as outlined:

January 1998–December 1998

Item	*Number/cost*
Number of prescriptions dispensed	5,042
Quantity (total number of tablets)	184,701
Ingredient cost (cost of drugs before discount)	£538,144

Terrorist Prisoners

Mr. Donaldson: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland if she will list *(a)* the number and *(b)* the affiliation of terrorist prisoners who have been released under the terms of the Northern Ireland (Sentences) Act 1998. [84989]

Mr. Ingram *[holding answer 21 May 1999]:* The information in respect of *(a)* and *(b)* is shown in the table. To date there have been 267 prisoners released under the terms of the Northern Ireland (Sentences) Act 1998. Information is held in relation to the perceived paramilitary association of prisoners, where applicable, for management purposes. It should be noted, however, that with the exception of HMP Maze where links are more clearly defined, this information is based on a combination of factors including the offence, sympathies and associates. This information is taken from statistics which are current at 24 May 1999.

Perceived affiliation of prisoners released on licence under the 1998 Sentences Act	*Total (as at 24 May 1999)*
UDA	63
No Trace	8
UFF	5
PIRA	123
UVF	47
Former INLA	7
Loyalist	4
Republican Sympathisers	2
[illegible]C	2
Criminal	1
LVF	4
Republican	1
Total	267

HOUSE OF COMMONS

Portcullis House

Mr. Stunell: To ask the Chairman of the Accommodation and Works Committee what steps were taken *(a)* to carry out an environmental impact assessment of Portcullis House and *(b)* to ensure that it sets a high standard for energy efficiency. [85055]

Sir Sydney Chapman: An environmental impact assessment was not carried out during the design period.

The House determined that the building should be energy efficient. The Measures to achieve this, which are included in the design of the building, are:

The use of cold ground water taken via a borehole to provide the chilling for the air conditioning system;

heat recovery from exhaust air and

the use of the thermal mass of the building to even out the heating and cooling requirements between night and day.

As a result, the building is expected to consume only one third of the energy of a conventionally air conditioned building.

FOREIGN AND COMMONWEALTH AFFAIRS

Sierra Leone

Mr. Howard: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs when the reference by the Minister of State, the hon. Member for Manchester, Central (Mr. Lloyd), to the scope of UN Security Council resolutions 1132 on 12 March 1998, *Official Report*, column 841, was first brought to his attention. [76064]

Mr. Robin Cook *[holding answer 11 May 1999]:* I refer to my statement in the House on 2 March 1999, *Official Report*, columns 894–901. Statements to Parliament by other FCO Ministers are brought to my attention as appropriate, not as a matter of course.

International Conventions and Charters

Mr. Gill: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs how many international *(a)* conventions and *(b)* charters have been (i) signed and (ii) ratified by the United Kingdom since 1972. [85278]

Mr. Tony Lloyd: Treaties (agreements binding in international law) are known by a variety of names, such as; Convention, Charter, Treaty, Protocol, Agreement, Final Act. etc. The term "charter" is also used to describe non-legally binding instruments.

The United Kingdom has signed a total of 587 multilateral treaties since 1972, and has ratified 387 in the same period. Of the multilateral treaties signed, 274 are conventions and 3 are charters. Of those ratified, 244 are conventions and 2 are charters. (The above figures for conventions include amending protocols to conventions, which are treaties in their own right and require separate signature and ratification). Corresponding information for bilateral conventions and charters can be provided only at disproportionate cost.

Falkland Islands

Mr. Hoyle: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will make a statement on the recent incident in the South Atlantic involving a Falkland Islands fishery protection vessel opening fire on a Taiwanese fishing boat. [85219]

Mr. Tony Lloyd: With Her Majesty's Government's approval, the Falkland Islands Government recently armed one of its Fisheries Protection Vessels (FPVs) with a 20mm Oerlikon cannon. On 15 May the armed FPV challenged an unlicensed Taiwanese fishing vessel which was 19 miles inside the Falkland Islands Outer Conservation Zone and appeared to be fishing. Messages and signals were passed by the FPV to the vessel which failed to respond. Warning shots were fired. After all warnings and warning shots had been ignored by the illegal vessel, the FPV sought and received permission from the Director of Fisheries of the Falkland Islands Government to fire directly at its bows. Another warning shot was fired followed by five single, aimed shots at the bow of the vessel. The illegal vessel was pursued out of Falkland Islands waters by the FPV, which acted in accordance with strict guidelines throughout the incident.

Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what export restrictions currently apply to FYROM; for what reasons; and what proposals the Government have to lift them. [85211]

Mr. Tony Lloyd: Export controls in general apply to all destinations.

The only country specific export control currently in place on the Republic of Macedonia is Group 3, Part 1, Schedule 1 of the Export of Goods (Control) Order 1994, which prohibits the export without an export licence of certain all-wheel drive utility vehicles capable of off road use, heavy duty recovery vehicles and drop sided trucks.

This control was introduced to address concerns that such vehicles might be used by para-military groups against British troops deployed on peace-keeping duties in the former Yugoslavia.

We are currently taking steps to remove this control in respect of the Republic of Macedonia.

European Union Events

Mr. Stringer: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will list the forthcoming business in the Council of the European Union for June; and if he will list the major European Union events for the next six months. [85608]

Ms Quin: The list is as follows:

European Calendar: June-November 1999

This calendar is primarily concerned with European Union matters, but certain other relevant events are also included. Events and dates quoted are based on the information available on the date of issue.

Date	*Venue*	*Event*
June 1999		
1	Dresden	Agriculture Ministers (Informal)
3–4	Cologne	European Council
7	Luxembourg	Education Council
8	Luxembourg	Health Council
10	Luxembourg	Fisheries Council
10–13		European Parliament Elections
14	Luxembourg	ECOFIN (possible)
14–15	Luxembourg	Agriculture Council
17–18	Luxembourg	Transport Council
21	Luxembourg	Internal Market Council
21–22	Luxembourg	General Affairs Council
22	Luxembourg	Labour and Social Affairs Council (possible)
24–25	Luxembourg	Environment Council
28	Luxembourg	Culture and Audiovisual Council
28–29	Rio de Janeiro	EU-Latin America/Caribbean Summit
July 1999		
2–3	Oulu	Industry and Research Ministers (Informal)
9–10	Oulu	Labour/Social Affairs Ministers (Informal)
12	Brussels	ECOFIN
16	Brussels	Budget Council
18–20	Savonlinna	Culture and Audiovisual Ministers (Informal)
19–20	Brussels	General Affairs Council
19–20	Brussels	Agriculture Council
20–23	Strasbourg	European Parliament Plenary
23–25	Helsinki	Environment Ministers (Informal)
28–30	Brussels	EU-ACP Ministerial Meeting
August 1999		
No Council Business		
September 1999		
4–5	Saariselka	Foreign Ministers (Informal)
10–11	Turku	ECOFIN (Informal)
12–14	Tampere	Agriculture Ministers (Informal)
13–14	Brussels	General Affairs Council
13–17	Strasbourg	European Parliament Plenary

Date	Venue	Event
16–17	Turku	Justice and Home Affairs Ministers (Informal)
24–25	Tampere	Education Ministers (Informal)
27–28	Kuopio	Ministers of Housing
27–28	Brussels	Agriculture Council
30 September-1 October	Helsinki	Ministerial Conference on Equality between Women and Men
October 1999		
4–5	Luxembourg	Justice and Home Affairs Council
4–5	Tampere	Regional Policy Ministers
4–8	Strasbourg	European Parliament Plenary
6	Luxembourg	Transport Council
8	Luxembourg	ECOFIN
11–12	Luxembourg	General Affairs Council
11–12	Luxembourg	Environment Council
15–16	Luxembourg	Special European Council
18–19	Luxembourg	Agriculture Council
22	Luxembourg	Labour/Social Affairs Council
24–25	Helsinki	Energy Ministers Task Force Meeting
25–29	Strasbourg	European Parliament Plenary
26	Luxembourg	Fisheries Council
28	Luxembourg	Research Council
29	Luxembourg	Justice and Home Affairs Council
November 1999		
3–4	Brussels	European Parliament Plenary
8	Brussels	ECOFIN
8	Brussels	Consumer Affairs Council
9	Brussels	Industry Council
11	Brussels	Development Council
12	Brussels	Labour and Social Affairs Council (possible)
12–13	Helsinki	Ministerial Conference on the Northern Dimension
15–16	Brussels	Agriculture Council
15–16	Brussels	General Affairs Council
15–19	Strasbourg	European Parliament Plenary
18	Brussels	Health Council
19	Brussels	Youth Council
22	Brussels	Fisheries Council (possible)
22–23	Brussels	EU-ACP Ministerial Meeting (possible)
23	Brussels	Culture and Audiovisual Council
26	Brussels	Budget Council
26	Brussels	Education Council
29	Brussels	ECOFIN
29	Brussels	Labour and Social Affairs Council
30	Brussels	Telecommunications Council

Monthly Forecast of Business: June 1999

The following subjects are likely to be discussed:

1 June 1999—Dresden—Agriculture Ministers (Informal)

No formal agenda

3–4 June 1999—Cologne—European Council

No formal agenda

7 June 1999—Luxembourg—Education Council

Adoption of provisional agenda

Adoption of list of "A" points

New generation of programmes

Leonardo II decision and negotiations on Socrates II (information from Presidency)

Commission report on Socrates I (information from the Commission and exchange of views)

Implementation of Leonardo II and Socrates II (information from the Commission)

Implementation of Europass (information from the Commission)

Contribution of Education to European Employment Pact (Presidency discussion paper)

Forward planning in the field of education (Presidency discussion paper)

(poss.) Conference of European Education Ministers in Budapest on 24–26 June 1999 (information from Presidency)

Any other business

8 June 1999—Luxembourg—Health Council

Morning

Adoption of the agenda

(poss.) Approval of the list of "A" items

Future Community action in the field of public health

Draft Council Resolution

Exchange of views

Antibiotic resistance—a strategy against the microbial threat

Draft Council Resolution

Communicable diseases

Commission report on the 4th meeting of the EU-United States task force on communicable diseases 8159/99 SAN 52

Commission briefing on development in Europe

Report on the State of Health in the Community (Migrants)

Commission progress briefing

Health issues in connection with the future enlargement of the community

(A) Presentation of Commission working paper on "Health and Enlargement"

(B) Preparation of informal Meeting with the Ministers of the countries applying for accession

Approval of the annotated agenda

Informal meeting with the Ministers of the applicant countries

Afternoon

Proposal for a Council recommendation on the limitation of exposure of the general public to electromagnetic fields 0 HZ-3000 GHZ (0)

(Legal basis: Article 152(4), second sub-paragraph)
Adoption 9620/98 SAN 107 ECO 230

Integration of health protection requirements in Community policies
Draft Council conclusions

Transmissible spongiform encephalopathies (TSES)
Exchange of views

Other business

(A) WHO tobacco free initiative

(Request by the Netherlands delegation)

(B) Non-conventional medicine

(Request by the Belgian Delegation)

(0) Item on which a vote may be taken

10 June 1999—Luxembourg—Fisheries Council

Adoption of the agenda

Approval of the list of "A" items

Proposal for a Council regulation laying down the details rules and arrangements regarding Community structural assistance in the fisheries sector (X)

Legal basis: Article 37 of the Treaty
Final adoption
DOC. 13605/98 PECHE 413

Proposal for a Council regulation establishing a list of types of behaviour which seriously infringe the rules of the Common Fisheries Policy (X)

Legal basis: Article 37 of the Treaty
Final Adoption
DOC. 6030/99 PECHE 31

(poss.) Proposal for a Council regulation allocating the fishing possibilities for certain fish stocks and modifying regulation no. 48/99 (in particular the allocation of tacs for blue whiting and for new tacs for spurdog and northern shrimps) (X) (Commission proposal awaited)
Final adoption

Fisheries agreements with third countries: cost/benefit analysis
State of play (oral report by the Commission)

Fisheries relations with Morocco

North Sea Conference—Intermediate Ministerial Meeting (IMM) 13–14 March 1997 Bergen, Norway—follow-up
Report by the Commission
(poss.) Presentation of Commission communication to Council and Parliament

Conservation of sandeels
Oral report on state of play by the Commission (at the request of the UK delegation)

Other business
Situation in the Adriatic as a consequence of the events in Kosovo (at the request of the Italian delegation)
Organisation of future work

(X) Item on which a vote may be requested.

10–13 June 1999—European Parliament Elections

14 June 1999—Luxembourg—ECOFIN (possible)

No agenda yet available

14–15 June 1999—Luxembourg—Agriculture Council

No agenda yet available

17–18 June 1999—Luxembourg—Transport Council

No agenda yet available

21 June 1999—Luxembourg—Internal Market Council

No agenda yet available

21–22 June 1999—Luxembourg—General Affairs Council

No agenda yet available

22 June 1999—Luxembourg—Labour and Social Affairs Council (possible)

No agenda yet available

24–25 June 1999—Luxembourg—Environment Council

No agenda yet available

28 June 1999—Luxembourg—Culture and Audiovisual Council

No agenda yet available

28–29 June 1999—Rio de Janeiro—EU-Latin America/Caribbean Summit

No agenda yet available.

Sudan

Sir Teddy Taylor: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs, pursuant to his answer of 17 May 1999, *Official Report*, column *241*, if the United States has informed him that it remains its position that chemical weapons materials related to international terrorism were being produced at the pharmaceutical factory in Khartoum in Sudan; and if he will make a statement. [85460]

Mr. Hoon: The US Government have not informed us of a change in their position on this issue.

Balkan Conflict (Legality)

Mr. Cohen: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will list the charges made against the British Government by the Government of Yugoslavia in the International Court of Justice at the Hague in respect of the conflict in Yugoslavia; what has been his response; and if he will make a statement. [85341]

Mr. Tony Lloyd: The application instituting proceedings and the request for interim measures in the case brought by the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia against the United Kingdom at the International Court of Justice will be placed in the Library of the House, together with the oral statements made on behalf of the FRY and the UK at the hearing on the request for interim measures which was held from 10 to 12 May.

SCOTLAND

Tuition Fees

9. **Mr. Fallon:** To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland when he last met representatives of the National Union of Students in Scotland to discuss tuition fees. [84135]

Dr. Reid: Scottish Office Ministers meet representatives of the higher education sector, including the National Union of Students in Scotland, from time to time. A range of issues are discussed.

From 1 July 1999, this will be a matter for the Scottish Parliament.

14. **Mr. Syms:** To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland when he last met the vice-chancellors of Scottish universities to discuss tuition fees. [84140]

Dr. Reid: Scottish Office Ministers meet representatives of the higher education sector, including the Vice Chancellors of Scottish Universities, from time to time to discuss a range of issues.

From 1 July 1999, this will be a matter for the Scottish Parliament.

17. **Mrs. Laing:** To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland when he last met representatives of students attending Scottish universities to discuss tuition fees. [84144]

Mr. Macdonald: Scottish Office Ministers meet representatives from the higher education sector, including students, from time to time. A wide range of issues are discussed.

From 1 July 1999, this will be a matter for the Scottish Parliament.

Pathfinder Report

10. **Mr. Ernie Ross:** To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland what action he is taking in response to the pathfinder report published in late March. [84136]

Mr. Macdonald: The Pathfinders to the Parliament report has been widely disseminated. The report has allowed business to generate ideas for early consideration by the Scottish Parliament and it is now for the Parliament and Scottish Executive, in partnership with business and industry, to consider and, if appropriate, to take forward the recommendations in the report.

Clydeside Industries

11. **Mr. Sarwar:** To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland if he will make a statement about the prospects for shipbuilding and related industries on Clydeside. [84137]

Dr. Reid: Three of the four shipyards on the Clyde have healthy order books. A Task Force has been appointed by the Under-Secretary, my noble Friend Lord Macdonald to help identify potential purchasers for the fourth yard, Kvaerner Govan, and has achieved real progress towards this end.

From 1 July 1999, economic development will be a matter for the Scottish Parliament.

Social Inclusion Strategy

13. **Mr. Savidge:** To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland if he will make a statement on the Government's social inclusion strategy. [84139]

Mr. Macdonald: The Government are taking forward a wide-ranging and well resourced programme of action to promote social inclusion in Scotland. Our social inclusion strategy was published on 1 March this year. The work taken forward under the strategy will be a matter for the Scottish Parliament.

Elections (Scottish Parliament)

15. **Mr. David Davis:** To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland what plans he has to review the system for elections to the Scottish Parliament. [84141]

Dr. Reid: I have no plans to review the system of elections to the Scottish Parliament.

Regional Selective Assistance

16. **Mr. Eric Clarke:** To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland what plans he has to provide RSA funding for the development of clusters of industrial and biotechnology institutions. [84143]

Mr. Macdonald: Regional Selective Assistance is available for qualifying investment projects carried out in the Assisted Areas, including projects in the biotechnology sector.

From 1 July 1999, this will be a matter for the Scottish Parliament.

Hospital Beds

18. **Mr. Russell Brown:** To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland what progress is being made in reducing the number of beds which are blocked in Scottish hospitals. [84145]

Mr. Macdonald: Health Boards in Scotland continue to work with their local authority partners in addressing all avenues to reduce delays in discharge from NHS care.

From 1 July 1999, this will be a matter for the Scottish Parliament.

European Union Funding

19. **Mr. Worthington:** To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland if he will make a statement on progress being made to determine the boundaries for Objective 2 status funding by the European Union. [84146]

Mr. Macdonald: We are currently consulting on this and will submit to the European Commission proposals for eligible areas for Objective 2.

Anti-drugs Strategy

20. **Mr. Alexander:** To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland if he will make a statement on the Government's anti-drug abuse strategy. [84147]

Mr. Macdonald: The Government recently enhanced the approach to tackling drug misuse in Scotland with the publication of "Tackling Drugs in Scotland: Action in Partnership". This document establishes a new framework of co-operation across agencies and communities in the implementation of a programme of comprehensive action throughout Scotland.

From 1 July 1999, it will be for the Scottish Parliament to consider the strategy set out in "Tackling Drugs in Scotland: Action in Partnership" and continue the task of reducing drug misuse in Scotland.

Mrs. Ann Winterton: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland when he last met the United Kingdom Anti-Drugs Co-ordinator to discuss the implementation of Her Majesty Government's anti-drugs strategy in Scotland. [84131]

Mr. Macdonald: The Secretary of State has not met formally with the United Kingdom Anti-Drugs Co-ordinator, but the former Minister for health and the arts in Scotland, my hon. Friend the Member for

Strathkelvin and Bearsden (Mr. Galbraith), has discussed Scotland's contribution to the UK Government's drugs strategy with Mr. Hellawell. This is set out in "Tackling Drugs in Scotland: Action in Partnership", which was launched in March 1999.

From 1 July 1999, it will be for the Scottish Parliament to consider the strategy set out in this document.

Gartcosh

21. **Mr. Tom Clarke:** To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland when he next expects to meet Lanarkshire Development Agency to discuss the industrial and jobs potential at Gartcosh. [84148]

Mr. Macdonald: I have no immediate plans to meet with Lanarkshire Development Agency to discuss the industrial and jobs potential at Gartcosh. The previous Secretary of State, my right hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow, Anniesland (Mr. Dewar), and the Prime Minister met with Lanarkshire Development Agency on 8 April to discuss inward investment and the opening of a new call centre at Cumbernauld. North Lanarkshire Council and Lanarkshire Development Agency have formed a Partnership to promote the regeneration of the Gartcosh site as a strategic industrial location capable of being marketed throughout the UK and internationally. The partnership is investing £11.6 million to transform the site into a fully-serviced 200 acre industrial park, which will be capable of accommodating up to 5,000 jobs and attracting substantial new investment into Lanarkshire.

Oil Industry Task Force

22. **Mr. Doran:** To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland if he will make a statement on the work of the oil industry task force. [84149]

Mr. Macdonald: The Oil and Gas Industry Task Force is examining a number of key areas vital to the long term future of the UK oil and gas industry. The priorities for action are Competitiveness, Skills and Training, Innovation and Technology, Fiscal Administration, Regulation and Licensing, Sustainable Development, and Long Term Vision. As a result of the work undertaken in the Task Force so far, a number of measures to boost oil and gas exploration and development were announced by my hon. Friend the Minister for Energy and Industry on 31 March.

The Task Force is expected to make final recommendations by the summer.

Ministerial Responsibilities

23. **Mr. Gerald Howarth:** To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland if he will make a statement on the extent of his responsibilities following the creation of the Scottish Executive. [84150]

Dr. Reid: I refer the hon. Member to the answer given earlier today to the hon. Members for Rochford and Southend, East (Sir T. Taylor) and for Bromsgrove (Miss Kirkbride).

Funding (Health and Education)

24. **Mr. Simon Hughes:** To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland how many representations he has received this year on *(a)* higher and further education funding and *(b)* NHS funding. [84151]

Mr. Macdonald: Scottish Office Ministers and officials have had regular contact with a wide range of institutions and interests in further and higher education. Issues arising have included matters relating to funding and I have been particularly pleased by the warm response from both sectors to our commitment to invest significantly in further and higher education throughout the three year Comprehensive Spending Review period.

Representations on NHS funding have been received from a variety of bodies. Following the Comprehensive Spending Review an additional investment of £1.8 billion is being made available in the NHS in Scotland over the next three years. A further £37.1 million over the next three years was provided in the March budget for Capital Modernisation.

From 1 July 1999, this will be a matter for the Scottish Parliament.

Infant Deaths

25. **Mr. David Stewart:** To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland what plans he has to introduce a confidential case inquiry into each incident of sudden unexpected infant death in Scotland. [84152]

Mr. Macdonald: I have no plans to do so. There is already a significant body of evidence relating to the epidemiology of sudden unexpected infant death. This is consistent with Health Departments' guidance and advice on reducing the risk of cot death. The Government will continue to support biomedical and health service research into this important topic, alongside the valuable work of voluntary agencies, such as the Scottish Cot Death Trust, to help find out how sudden unexpected infant death might be reduced further.

From 1 July 1999, this will be a matter for the Scottish Parliament.

Food Standards Agency

26. **Mr. Nicholas Winterton:** To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland what assessment he has made of the impact on small businesses of the flat rate levy to fund the new Food Standards Agency. [84153]

Mr. Macdonald: The possible impact of the levy has been discussed with representatives from small business organisations at a series of consultation seminars across Scotland. We have also received a large number of responses to the public consultation on the charging proposals. We are considering these responses—including suggestions for alternative proposals—before deciding how to proceed.

From 1 July 1999, this will be a matter for the Scottish Parliament.

NHS Reform

27. **Mrs. Fyfe:** To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland what plans he has for the reform of the NHS. [84154]

Mr. Macdonald: Our broad plans to modernise the NHS in Scotland were set out in the White Paper "Designed to Care", which we published in December 1997. That programme is now being implemented in detail, and the primary legislation required is currently before Parliament. Our intention now is to consolidate the modernisation process.

From 1 July 1999, this will be a matter for the Scottish Parliament.

EU Structural Funds

28. **Mrs. McKenna:** To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland what progress has been made in deciding the future of European structural funds in Scotland. [84155]

Mr. Macdonald: We have made good progress. At the Berlin Summit in March, my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister secured a special aid package for the Highlands and Islands, and we are now consulting on Objectives 2 and 3.

Millennium Bug

Mr. Alasdair Morgan: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland what is the degree of preparedness for the Year 2000 and the millennium bug of the pharmacy practice division of the Common Services Agency of the Scottish Health Service. [84867]

Mr. Macdonald: The Common Services Agency has an extensive programme for Year 2000 preparedness. In the case of the Pharmacy Practice Division, the decision was taken to replace the existing old and largely manual system with a completely new system which incorporates high speed Intelligent Character Recognition. I am advised by the General Manager of the CSA that best current estimates from the suppliers indicate that the new system will complete testing and come into operation before the end of this calendar year, and that robust contingency plans are being developed to ensure continuity of payments to pharmacy contractors.

From 1 July 1999, this will be a matter for the Scottish Parliament.

HIV/AIDS

Dr. Strang: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland (1) if he will list the cumulative number of people who had been diagnosed HIV positive (i) broken down by probable means of transmission and (ii) in total in *(a)* Scotland and *(b)* each health board area of Scotland, for each year from 1981 to 1988, in 1998 and for 1999 to date; [84823]

(2) how many people were newly diagnosed HIV positive (i) broken down by probable means of transmission and (ii) in total in *(a)* Scotland and *(b)* each health board area of Scotland, for each year from 1981 to 1988, in 1998 and for 1999 to date. [84822]

(3) if he will list the cumulative number of people who had been diagnosed HIV positive and not known to have died (i) broken down by probable means of transmission and (ii) in total in *(a)* Scotland and *(b)* each health board area of Scotland, for each year from 1981 to 1988, in 1998 and for 1999 to date. [84824]

Mr. Macdonald: I shall write to my right hon. Friend in view of the extent of the information requested. I shall arrange for a copy of my letter to be placed in the Library of the House.

From 1 July 1999, this will be a matter for the Scottish Parliament.

Dr. Strang: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland how many people diagnosed with AIDS and not known to have died there were in *(a)* Scotland and *(b)* each health board area of Scotland in each year from 1981 to 1988, in 1998 and in 1999 to date. [84818]

Mr. Macdonald: The information is set out in the following table:

AIDS cases not known to be dead as at 31 December of selected years by health board of AIDS registration, and for Scotland, as at 31 March 1999

Health Board	*1981*	*1982*	*1983*	*1984*	*1985*	*1986*	*1987*	*1988*	*1998*	*1999*
Argyll & Clyde	0	0	0	0	0	0	2	2	3	3
Ayrshire & Arran	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	2	2
Borders	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Dumfries & Galloway	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Fife	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	1	15	15
Forth Valley	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Grampian	0	0	0	0	0	1	1	1	7	7
Greater Glasgow	0	0	0	1	3	1	10	13	77	78
Highland	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	2	2
Lanarkshire	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	5	5
Lothian	0	0	0	2	3	6	15	25	106	110
Orkney	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Shetland	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Tayside	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	4	26	24
Western Isles	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Scotland	0	0	0	3	7	9	29	46	243	246

Note:

This table is based on year of AIDS diagnosis.

Source:

The Scottish Centre for Infection and Environmental Health AIDS/HIV Register

From 1 July 1999, this will be a matter for the Scottish Parliament.

Dr. Strang: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland how many people with AIDS died in *(a)* Scotland and *(b)* each health board area of Scotland in each year from 1981 to 1988, in 1998 and in 1999 to date. [84819]

Mr. Macdonald: The information is set out in the following table.

AIDS deaths by health board of AIDS registration, and for Scotland, by year of death, as at 31 March 1999

Health board	*1981*	*1982*	*1983*	*1984*	*1985*	*1986*	*1987*	*1988*	*1998*	*1999*
Argyll and Clyde	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Ayrshire and Arran	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Borders	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Dumfries and Galloway	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Fife	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	0
Forth Valley	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	0
Grampian	0	0	0	0	0	0	2	1	1	0
Greater Glasgow	0	1	0	1	0	6	3	8	6	0
Highland	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	1	0
Lanarkshire	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	0
Lothian	0	0	0	0	0	2	4	8	6	0
Orkney	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Shetland	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Tayside	0	0	0	0	0	1	1	0	8	2
Western Isles	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Scotland	0	1	0	1	1	10	12	17	22	2

Source:
The Scottish Centre for Infection and Environmental Health AIDS/HIV Register.

From 1 July 1999, this will be a matter for the Scottish Parliament.

Dr. Strang: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland if he will list the cumulative number of people diagnosed with AIDS in *(a)* Scotland and *(b)* each health board area of Scotland in each year from 1981 to 1998, and in 1999 to date. [84821]

Mr. Macdonald: The information is set out in the table:

Cumulative AIDS cases diagnosed as at 31 December of selected year, by health board of AIDS registration, and for Scotland, as at 31 March 1999

Health board	*1981*	*1982*	*1983*	*1984*	*1985*	*1986*	*1987*	*1988*	*198*
Argyll and Clyde	0	0	0	0	0	0	2	2	3
Ayrshire and Arran	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	4
Borders	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Dumfries and Galloway	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Fife	0	0	0	0	0	0	2	2	2
Forth Valley	0	0	0	0	1	1	1	1	2
Grampian	0	0	0	0	0	1	3	4	6
Greater Glasgow	0	1	1	3	5	9	21	32	51
Highland	0	0	0	0	1	1	1	1	2
Lanarkshire	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	1	1
Lothian	0	0	0	2	3	8	21	39	81
Orkney	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Shetland	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Tayside	0	0	0	0	0	2	2	6	13
Western Isles	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Scotland	0	1	1	5	10	22	54	88	165

Cumulative AIDS cases diagnosed as at 31 December of selected year, by health board of AIDS registration, and for Scotland, as at 31 March 1999

Health board	*1990*	*1991*	*1992*	*1993*	*1994*	*1995*	*1996*	*1997*	*1998*	*1999*
Argyll and Clyde	4	4	4	5	5	5	5	5	7	7
Ayrshire and Arran	4	4	5	6	8	10	10	11	11	11
Borders	0	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1
Dumfries and Galloway	2	2	2	2	3	3	3	3	3	3
Fife	3	4	4	8	11	16	22	26	27	27
Forth Valley	2	2	2	3	3	4	4	4	4	4
Grampian	9	14	19	20	28	33	36	36	37	37
Greater Glasgow	74	107	130	161	188	213	227	249	257	258

Cumulative AIDS cases diagnosed as at 31 December of selected year, by health board of AIDS registration, and for Scotland, as at 31 March 1999

Health board	*1990*	*1991*	*1992*	*1993*	*1994*	*1995*	*1996*	*1997*	*1998*	*1999*
Highland	2	3	3	3	4	4	5	6	7	7
Lanarkshire	2	7	8	9	10	11	11	12	15	15
Lothian	121	160	198	266	310	367	404	428	441	445
Orkney	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Shetland	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Tayside	18	37	50	68	96	121	140	147	154	154
Western Isles	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Scotland	241	345	426	552	667	788	868	928	964	969

Source:
The Scottish Centre for Infection and Environmental Health AIDS/HIV Register

From 1 July 1999, this will be a matter for the Scottish Parliament.

Further and Higher Education

Mr. Welsh: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland what are the distribution figures across (i) higher and further education institutions in Scotland and (ii) higher and further education courses in Scotland for the Government's target of *(a)* 750,000 higher and further education places in Scotland, *(b)* increasing the number of higher and further education places in Scotland by 42,000 and *(c)* 40,000 full time equivalent places in Scotland by 2001–02. [84876]

Dr. Reid *[holding answer 24 May 1999]:* The information is not available in the form requested. The table indicates the numbers of students in further and higher education institutions in Scotland, and the distribution across further and higher education courses for 1997–98, the last year for which statistics are available. 42,000 additional student places will be funded over the Comprehensive Spending Review period from 1999–2000 to 2001–02 (40,000 in FE colleges and 2,000 in HE institutions). The distribution of these places between level and mode of delivery will be a matter for the Scottish Further and Scottish Higher Education Funding Councils. We have indicated that institutions should make it a priority to draw additional students from under-represented groups.

From 1 July 1999, this will be a matter for the Scottish Parliament.

	HE institutions	*FE institutions* [1]	*Total*
1997–98			
FE courses[2]	72,923	341,941	414,864
HE courses	178,575	69,124	247,699
Total	251,498	411,065	662,563

[1] Provisional
[2] It is possible for a student to be enrolled on more than one course in one year. This is particularly relevant to the part time FE sector. Students are counted for each course on which they enrol.

Energy Efficiency

Mr. David Marshall: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland what plans he has to improve energy efficiency and eradicate dampness in housing. [R] [84142]

Mr. Macdonald: A new Warm Deal will be introduced on 1 July providing a £500 grant to improve energy efficiency for low income households. This year's budget will be £12 million and the scheme will also create up to 400 places under the New Deal. This will be the best measure yet to provide affordable warmth and tackle damp houses in Scotland.

From 1 July 1999, this will be a matter for the Scottish Parliament.

LORD CHANCELLOR'S DEPARTMENT

Office for the Supervision of Solicitors

33. **Mr. Sutcliffe:** To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department what representations he has received about the Office for the Supervision of Solicitors. [84162]

Mr. Vaz: The Lord Chancellor's Department receives many representations about the handling of complaints of inadequate professional service by the Office for the Supervision of Solicitors.

The Government have increasing concern about the Office and are therefore bringing forward proposals to amend the Access to Justice Bill, which are aimed at improving its performance.

Freedom of Information

36. **Mr. Mackinlay:** To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department what discussions he has had with the Home Secretary on the implications of the Government's proposals for freedom of information for the work of his Department. [84165]

Mr. Vaz: Neither I nor my predecessor, my hon. Friend the Member for Ashfield (Mr. Hoon) have had any discussions. The Lord Chancellor was actively involved in the collective ministerial discussions which led to the publication of a draft Bill for consultation on 24 May.

Access to Justice

37. **Mr. Ben Chapman:** To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department what representations he has received on the impact of his proposals to increase access to justice on poorer people. [84166]

Mr. Vaz: The Lord Chancellor's Department has received representations from a wide range of individuals and interested organisations on all aspects of access to justice.

39. **Mr. Luff:** To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department what steps he is taking to maintain access to justice for rural communities. [84168]

Mr. Vaz: Once the Regional Legal Service Committees have established the legal needs of their particular communities, the Legal Service Commission will purchase, as far as possible within the financial resources available, the most appropriate quality assured legal service to meet those needs. Provision and need will then continue to be monitored by the Regional Legal Service Committees for both level and standards of service and adjusted appropriately. Additionally, if necessary, special provision can be made, such as solicitors having to travel to their clients, and the use of telephone advice and outreach services is also being developed to improve access to justice for all.

Community Legal Service

38. **Helen Jones:** To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department if he will make a statement on the impact of the proposed community legal service on representation at tribunals. [84167]

Mr. Vaz: It would generally be premature to decide what changes to make in respect of help with tribunal cases until the Government have completed their review of whether tribunal arrangements, including representation, meet our ECHR and EU obligations. Meanwhile, advice and assistance short of representation is, and will remain, available for tribunal cases.

Magistrates

40. **Mr. Simon Hughes:** To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department since May 1997 how many *(a)* male, *(b)* female, *(c)* white, *(d)* black and Asian, *(e)* over 60-year-old and *(f)* under 30-year-old magistrates have been appointed. [84169]

Mr. Vaz: The information requested is only available from 1 January 1997 to 31 March 1999 and is as follows:

(a) 1,591 male magistrates appointed

(b) 1,635 female magistrates appointed

(c) 3,021 white magistrates appointed

(d) 95 black and 110 Asian magistrates appointed

(e) 56 magistrates over the age of 60 appointed

(f) 42 magistrates under the age of 30 appointed.

Ogden Tables Working Party

Mr. Dismore: To ask the Minister of State, Lord Chancellor's Department if he will implement the recommendations of the Ogden tables working party to set a rate of return of two per cent.; and if he will make a statement. [84932]

Mr. Vaz: The discount rate to be applied in the calculation of damages for personal injuries and fatal accidents cases affects the interests of both plaintiffs and defendants. The Lord Chancellor will be issuing a consultation paper next month canvassing views on how the rate should be set, and reviewed, before deciding whether and how to exercise the power to set the rate conferred on him by Section 1 of the Damages Act 1996.

Magistrates (Doncaster)

Mr. Ennis: To ask the Minister of State, Lord Chancellor's Department how many magistrates sit on the Doncaster Magistrates Bench; and how many of those magistrates reside in the Barnsley East and Mexborough constituency. [84986]

Mr. Vaz: There are currently 184 magistrates on the Doncaster Bench and of those, 16 reside in the Barnsley, East and Mexborough constituency.

Magistrates (Barnsley)

Mr. Ennis: To ask the Minister of State, Lord Chancellor's Department how many magistrates sit on the Barnsley Magistrates' Bench; and how many of those magistrates reside in the Barnsley, East and Mexborough constituency. [84987]

Mr. Vaz: There are currently 129 magistrates on the Barnsley Bench and of those, 11 reside in the Barnsley, East and Mexborough constituency.

Unified Civil Rules

Mr. Kidney: To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department what assessment he has made of the court service's performance in introducing the new, unified civil rules and related procedural reforms. [84159]

Mr. Vaz: Implementation of the Civil Procedure rules took place only four weeks ago, on Monday 26 April. It is therefore a little early to assess the Court Service's performance in detail. However, that the first stage of implementation of the reforms is going well is thanks to the efforts of everyone who worked so hard to achieve implementation on time.

TREASURY

Domestic Fuel Bills

Mr. Forth: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what estimate the Government have made of the effects in percentage terms on average domestic fuel bills of *(a)* the introduction of competition into the domestic gas market, *(b)* the reduction in VAT on domestic fuel and *(c)* the windfall tax, over the period since each measure was introduced. [84660]

Ms Hewitt: According to latest DTI figures, the combined impact of competition and regulation has reduced the average domestic gas bill by around 16.5 per cent. in

real terms since competition was first introduced into the domestic gas market in 1996.

Assuming no demand effects, the reduction in the VAT rate on domestic fuel from 8 per cent. to 5 per cent. in September 1997 reduced the average domestic fuel bill by just under 3 per cent.

In his Budget speech in July 1997, the Chancellor said that the windfall tax could be paid without any impact on prices. It is the Government's view that domestic fuel bills have not been affected by the windfall tax. The energy regulators have publicly supported this view.

Community Psychiatric Nurses

Mr. Drew: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer (1) what plans he has to review the classification of community psychiatric nurses as essential users of cars; [84577]

(2) if he will publish the studies commissioned by him into the essential use of cars by community psychiatric nurses. [84578]

Ms Hewitt *[holding answer 18 May 1999]:* The Chancellor has not commissioned any studies into the use of cars by community psychiatric nurses and he has no plans to do so. Community psychiatric nurses provided with small cars with low carbon dioxide emissions, in which they drive low business mileage, stand to benefit from the fundamental reform of company car tax to be implemented from April 2002.

Euro

Mr. Gill: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if the euro will be adopted as the currency in French overseas territories. [84901]

Ms Hewitt: The euro is the currency of the French overseas Departments and of Saint-Pierre-et-Miquelon and Mayotte. The euro has not been adopted as the currency of the French overseas territories.

UK Payments (EU)

Mr. Gill: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer in what currency the UK's contribution to the EU is made. [84902]

Ms Hewitt: United Kingdom gross contributions to the EC Budget are made in pounds sterling.

Millennium Gift Aid

Mr. Gill: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer for what reasons *(a)* Jordan, *(b)* Syria, *(c)* Lebanon and *(d)* the West Bank and the Gaza Strip are excluded from the list of countries eligible for Millennium Gift Aid; and if he will make a statement. [84903]

Ms Hewitt: The Millennium Gift Aid scheme (MGA) was introduced in 1998 as part of the Government's initiative to relieve the debt burden in developing countries. MGA provides tax relief for donations to UK charities for educational and anti-poverty projects in the world's poorest countries. The relief applies to the 80 countries that are eligible for lending either by the International Development Association (IDA), or jointly by the IDA and the International Bank for Reconstruction and Development, both organisations of the World Bank. Jordan, Syria, Lebanon, the West Bank and the Gaza Strip are not on the World Bank list.

On 6 April 1999 the Chancellor announced that MGA is to be extended to cover donations to UK charities to help the Kosovan refugees. This is in response to the urgent humanitarian crisis in Kosovo and to assist charities with their emergency fund-raising appeals. There are no plans to add further to the causes that are eligible for MGA.

There is a range of tax reliefs for giving to charity, apart from MGA, which apply to all charitable causes. In addition, the Review of Charity Taxation has proposed extending the advantages of MGA to all charitable causes after 31 December 2000.

Overseas Debt

Ms Drown: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what is the Government's policy on reductions in debt service payments after a country has emerged from the Heavily Indebted Poor Countries Initiative; and if he will make a statement. [84961]

Ms Hewitt: The Chancellor of the Exchequer and the Secretary of State for International Development have called for an enhanced HIPC initiative which will provide debt relief faster, deeper and wider than is currently delivered. The UK has stressed the importance of early debt service reductions, and thereby of releasing funds for programmes that reduce poverty.

Superannuation Schemes

Ms Stuart: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer how many *(a)* current and *(b)* deferred members there are in (A) the (i) police, (ii) fire service, (iii) principal Civil Service, (iv) National Health Service, (v) armed forces and (vi) local government pension schemes and (B) the teachers' superannuation scheme. [85271]

Mr. Milburn: The administration of public service pension schemes is the responsibility of various other Government Departments or local authorities, not Her Majesty's Treasury. The latest information held centrally, which has been supplied by the responsible Departments, is as follows.

Responsible department	Pension schemes	Current members	As at	Deferred members	As at
Home Office[1]	Police (E, W & Sc)[2]	140,000	31 March 1999	—[4]	—
Home Office[1]	Firefighters (E, W & Sc)[2]	38,000	31 March 1998	—[4]	—
Cabinet Office	Principal Civil Service Pension Scheme	510,000	30 September 1997	237,000	30 September 1998
Department of Health	National Health Service (England & Wales)	892,000	31 March 1999	240,000	31 March 1999
Scottish Office[1]	NHS (Scotland)	108,000	31 March 1999	60,000	31 March 1999
Ministry of Defence	Armed Forces	212,000	1 April 1997	238,000	1 April 1997
Department of the Environment Transport and the Regions	Local Government (England and Wales)[2]	1,328,000	31 March 1998	386,000	31 March 1998
Scottish Office[1]	Local Government (Scotland)[2]	157,000[3]	31 March 1998	36,000[3]	31 March 1998
Department for Education and Employment	Teachers (England and Wales)	558,000	31 March 1997	151,000	31 March 1997
Scottish Office[1]	Teachers (Scotland)	66,000	31 March 1999	41,000	31 March 1999

[1] From 1 July 1999 responsibility for police, fire, NHS, local government and teachers' pensions in Scotland will pass to the Scottish Executive.
[2] These schemes are administered by local authorities, which provide any data.
[3] Provisional figures.
[4] Not available centrally.

VAT

Mr. Maude: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if he will list the proposed new VAT exemption categories available to VAT-registered bodies where VAT is incurred and not recovered on importation, intra-EC acquisition, or production of goods following the judgment of the European Court against the Republic of Italy (Case C-45/95); and if he will make a statement. [85114]

Dawn Primarolo: The proposed changes were explained in a technical note, issued on 21 April, which invited comments by 21 May 1999.

Electronic Transactions

Mr. Maude: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what progress he has made in achieving the Government's target on electronic transactions with Government; and if he will make a statement. [85100]

Mr. Milburn: Good progress is being made by Departments in achieving the overall target of undertaking 90 per cent. of Government low value transactions electronically by 2001. The volume of low value transactions undertaken through the Government Procurement Card continues to double each quarter and currently stands at 58,000 transactions worth £6.5 million.

The Minister for the Cabinet Office is responsible for the Information Age targets which were set out in the Modernising Government White Paper that 25 per cent. of dealings with the Government should be capable of being done by the public electronically by 2002, 50 per cent. by 2005, and 100 per cent. by 2008. My right hon. Friend the Minister for the Cabinet Office will be reporting progress shortly.

Funding (Advertising)

Mr. Horam: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if the Financial Services and Markets Bill is planned to relax existing rules on advertising for funding. [85276]

Ms Hewitt: The Financial Services and Markets Bill will introduce an updated and improved regime for the regulation of financial promotions. I announced on 17 March 1999, *Official Report*, columns *661–62*, the publication of a consultation paper. This includes consideration of ways to facilitate informal capital raising to assist small and medium sized firms gain access to investment funding. A number of responses have been received and are being considered.

London Stock Exchange

Dr. Desmond Turner: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if he will discuss with the Director General of Fair Trading the operation of the rules of the London Stock Exchange as they relate to the publication of information affecting employees of listed companies. [85318]

Ms Hewitt: We are in contact as the need arises with the Director General of Fair Trading on competition aspects of the rules of the London Stock Exchange. However, the rules of the Exchange do allow a company at its discretion to undertake confidential consultation with employee representatives before making a public announcement.

Securities Commissions

Mr. Loughton: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what discussions he has held with the International Organisation of Securities Commissions on the relocation of its headquarters to the United Kingdom. [85126]

Ms Hewitt *[holding answer 24 May 1999]:* The application procedure involved cities rather than Governments applying to host the IOSCO headquarters. The Corporation of London's bid was supported by the Prime Minister and by Treasury Ministers.

International Organisation of Securities Commissions

Mr. Loughton: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what is the policy of Her Majesty's Government on the

relocation of the headquarters or other offices of the International Organisation of Securities Commissions to the United Kingdom. [85127]

Ms Hewitt *[holding answer 24 May 1999]:* HM Government have supported the Corporation of London's bid for the IOSCO secretariat to relocate to London.

Endowment Policies

Mr. Hawkins: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer, pursuant to his answer of 4 May 1999, *Official Report*, columns *348–49*, on endowment policies, what estimate he has made of the size of the traded endowment market. [85123]

Ms Hewitt *[holding answer 24 May 1999]:* The traded endowment market has an estimated value of £250 million per year. In contrast the value of with-profit bonds issued by life offices is £6 billion per year.

Mr. Hawkins: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer, pursuant to his answer of 4 May 1999, *Official Report*, column *348*, on endowment policies, on the basis of what evidence he stated that the prices offered for second-hand endowment policies are tending to converge with surrender values. [85122]

Ms Hewitt *[holding answer 24 May 1999]:* The Financial Services Authority (FSA) monitors prices in the industry. FSA reports that some life offices have increased the surrender values of endowment policies, bringing them closer to the typical prices offered on the second hand endowment market.

Mr. Hawkins: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer, pursuant to his answer of 4 May 1999, *Official Report*, column *348*, on endowment policies, what estimate he has made of the cost of extending the scope of the Financial Services Act 1986 to include all dealings in traded endowment policies. [85121]

Ms Hewitt *[holding answer 24 May 1999]:* The important issue is not absolute cost but the need to avoid disproportionate cost. Given the small size of the traded endowment market and the convergence between surrender values and traded endowment prices, the cost of including all dealings within the scope of the Financial Services Act 1986 is likely to exceed any benefits. The Treasury is keeping the situation under review.

Comparative Earnings

Mr. Moore: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer (1) if he will list the average weekly earnings *(a)* including and *(b)* excluding overtime for part-time workers in (i) Scotland, (ii) each of the unitary local authority areas in Scotland and (iii) Great Britain, broken down for men and women in manual employment and non-manual employment and for all workers; [85051]

(2) if he will list the percentage of workers on adult rates of pay in part-time employment whose hourly earnings *(a)* including and *(b)* excluding overtime pay are less than (i) £4.79, (ii) £6.38, (iii) £6.90 and (iv) £3.60 in (1) Scotland, (2) each of the unitary local authority areas in Scotland and (3) Great Britain, broken down by (A) male manual, (B) male non-manual, (C) female manual, (D) female non-manual, (E) all manual, (F) all non-manual and (G) all workers. [85050]

Ms Hewitt *[holding answer 24 May 1999]:* The information requested falls within the responsibility of the Director of the Office for National Statistics. I have asked him to reply.

Letter from Tim Holt to Mr. Michael Moore, dated 25 May 1999:

As the Director of the Office for National Statistics (ONS), I have been asked to reply to your recent questions regarding earnings for part-time workers in Scotland, the Scottish local authorities and Great Britain.

The New Earnings Survey (NES) can provide earnings data for small geographical areas. However, the release of NES data is restricted to figures which are derived from a sufficiently large sample of employees, and have an acceptable level of accuracy. I have provided the available data for Scotland, the Scottish local authorities and Great Britain in the attached tables. These are based on the 1998 NES, the latest survey for which data are available.

The NES is based on a one per cent. sample of employees in the PAYE system and is therefore likely to under-represent relatively low paid staff earning below the tax threshold and in particular those who work part-time.

I will arrange for a copy of this letter to be placed in the Library.

Green-field and Brown-field Development

Mr. Sheerman: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if he will introduce a taxation system that will *(a)* discourage the development of green-field sites and *(b)* encourage the development of brown-field land. [85459]

Ms Hewitt: The Government's policy is to discourage green-field development and to raise the proportion of new homes built on brown-field land. But this is an extremely complicated issue and needs careful analysis. Tax is just one factor in meeting housing policy objectives and it may not be the most effective. Land use planning clearly has a key role.

Manufacturing

Mr. Jim Cunningham: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what assessment he has made of the economic situation in the manufacturing sector *(a)* in the West Midlands region and *(b)* in the United Kingdom; and what steps he is taking to encourage growth in the sector. [85135]

Ms Hewitt: Recent surveys have shown an improvement in confidence among manufacturers across the country and there is a widespread consensus that manufacturing output will strengthen into 2000. The Government believe that the best way they can support all sectors of business is by delivering long-term stability—based on low inflation and sound public finances—and by working with business to help improve Britain's productivity performance.

BBC

Mr. Fallon: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if the commercial operations of the BBC are subject to Treasury approval. [85347]

Mr. Milburn: The commercial operations of the BBC are subject to the approval of the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport.

Written Answers to Questions

Wednesday 26 May 1999

LORD CHANCELLOR'S DEPARTMENT

Magistrates

Mr. Ennis: To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department how many *(a)* women and *(b)* disabled magistrates sit on the (i) Barnsley and (ii) Doncaster bench. [85246]

Mr. Vaz: There are currently 56 women on the Barnsley bench and 90 women on the Doncaster bench. No formal records are kept of those who are registered disabled on either the Barnsley or the Doncaster bench.

Mr. Ennis: To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department what is the average age of the magistrates who sit on the *(a)* Barnsley and *(b)* Doncaster bench. [85245]

Mr. Vaz: The average age of the magistrates who sit on the Barnsley and Doncaster benches is 56.

DEFENCE

Commission for Racial Equality

Mr. Rammell: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will make a statement on the progress being made by the Armed Forces to implement the partnership agreement between his Department and the Commission for Racial Equality. [85666]

Mr. Doug Henderson: The Chief of Defence Staff signed a five year Partnership Agreement with the CRE in March 1998. It provides an unambiguous foundation for Service racial equality policies, committing the Armed Forces to reflecting more closely the rich ethnic balance of our society, and developing a culture which positively welcomes diversity. It also calls for clear lines of accountability in tackling discrimination and racist behaviour and in ensuring that all personnel embrace a personal responsibility to implement the spirit of the Agreement.

The Armed Forces have made considerable efforts to implement the Agreement's principles and I am pleased to report excellent progress over its first year of operation.

All the Services continue to attach the highest priority to recruiting and retaining more ethnic minority personnel. Recruitment advertising campaigns targeting ethnic minorities have proved attractive, with career applications doubling over the last two years. All three Services now have specialist recruiting teams dedicated to increasing awareness of Service careers amongst ethnic communities, and a new long-term "Community Partnerships" campaign has been launched to build bridges between the Services and black, Asian and other non-white communities across the nation. The proportion of intake to the Services in 1998–99 which was from ethnic minorities was 1.8 per cent., about a 40 per cent. increase on 1997–98.

Significant emphasis has also been attached to equal opportunities and cultural awareness training. The Tri-Service Equal Opportunities Training Centre at Shrivenham was launched in September 1998 and has already trained over 1,000 Service Equal Opportunity Advisers to provide specialist advice and training to their units. Similar training is now mandatory for senior military officers, and over 300 have already passed TSEOTC courses.

The Services are continuing to develop a culture which not only holds zero tolerance to any form of racist behaviour, but which also positively welcomes racial diversity. Individual Service efforts in the field of equal opportunities are now co-ordinated through the Corporate Framework announced in March 1999, which encourages a sharing of best practice across the Armed Forces. Service recruitment, promotion and management procedures are objectively reviewed to ensure that they do not unwittingly discriminate against ethnic minority personnel.

All personnel are regularly reminded of their own personal responsibility not just in combating racism, but in ensuring a harassment-free serving environment. The Chief of Defence Staff has formally declared "war on racism", and the Service Chiefs have reminded their Commanders, as recently as March this year, that any form of racist behaviour is incompatible with military service. Any incidents or accusations of racism or harassment are taken very seriously and will be promptly and thoroughly investigated—guilty parties face the severest penalties up to and including dismissal.

Progress is regularly reviewed, with representatives from all three Services meeting with the CRE Commissioners on a regular basis. I also met with Sir Herman Ouseley, the CRE Chairman earlier this year, and will be doing so again in the future. The Chief of Defence Staff, who has overall responsibility for implementation of the Partnership Agreement, will be reviewing our progress with the CRE shortly.

In the year ahead, the Services will consolidate their successes to date and continue to drive forward equal opportunity initiatives. Complacency is not an option; this is a long-term process and the Armed Forces remain committed to implementing the spirit and letter of the Partnership Agreement.

Logistic Information Systems Agency

Laura Moffatt: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what Key Targets have been set for the Chief Executive of the Logistic Information Systems Agency for the financial year 1999–2000. [85667]

Mr. Doug Henderson: The Chief Executive of the Logistic Information Systems Agency has been set the following Key Targets for 1999–2000:

Key Target 1—To deliver Customer Supplier Agreements (CSAs) with increasing efficiency. Target 3 per cent.

Key Target 2—Maintain or improve cost ratio of Information Systems delivery staff to Administrative staff of 1:0.59.

Key Target 3—Maintain or improve ratio of value of fixed assets to value of work delivered of 1:14.

Key Target 4—To improve delivery performance to customer requirements such that:

95 per cent. of Requests for Change are assessed within 7 days.

98 per cent. of Requests For Change are assessed within 21 days.

The average period required for Request For Change Authorisation is reduced by 20 per cent. from 105 days to 85 days.

90 per cent of Requests For Change are moved from the Tasking Phase to the Implementation Phase within 42 days.

NATO Forces (Yugoslavia)

Mr. Llew Smith: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will list the *(a)* weapons and *(b)* military forces deployed by NATO in the conflict with Yugoslavia. [83288]

Mr. George Robertson: The following UK units, or elements thereof, together with their associated weapons systems, are currently committed to NATO operations in the Balkans:

Royal Navy

HMS Norfolk
HMS Iron Duke
HMS Grafton
HMS Splendid
HMS Bulldog
HMS Sandown
RFA Fort Austin
3 Lynx Helicopters

Army

Elements of Headquarters Allied Rapid Reaction Corps
1st Signals Brigade
16th Signals Regiment
2 Signals Regiment
7 Signals Regiment
3rd Armoured Division Signals Regiment
30 Signals Regiment
14th Topographical Squadron Royal Engineers
659 Squadron Army Air Corps
Headquarters 4th Armoured Brigade
Kings Royal Hussars
4th Regiment Royal Artillery
21st Regiment Royal Engineers
1st Battalion Irish Guards
2nd Armoured Field Ambulance
D Squadron Household Cavalry Regiment
A Company the Green Howards
Burma Company King's Own Royal Border Regiment
Headquarters (UK) Combat Service Support Group
28th Regiment Royal Engineers
17 Port and Maritime Regiment
29th Regiment Royal Logistics Corps
27th Regiment Royal Logistics Corps
Royal Military Police

Royal Air Force

16 Harrier GR7s
8 Tornado GR1s
3 E-3D Sentry AWACS
4 Tristar tankers
3 VC 10 tankers
1 Nimrod R
2 Puma helicopters.

It is for other individual member countries to provide information on their contribution of weapons and forces to NATO operations.

WALES

Schools

Mr. Barry Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales how many *(a)* primary schools and *(b)* high schools he has visited; and if he will make a statement. [84359]

Mr. Michael: Since taking up office, I have visited 11 primary schools and 6 secondary schools in Wales. These are:

Primary:

Evenlode County Primary, Penarth;
Grangetown Junior and Infant, Cardiff;
Cornist County Primary, Flint;
Saron County Primary, Ammanford;
Rumney Junior, Cardiff;
Emmanuel Primary, Rhyl;
Blackwood Infants, Blackwood;
Dinas Powys Primary, Vale of Glamorgan;
Narberth County Primary, Pembrokeshire;
Ysgol Tegryn Primary, Pembrokeshire;
Ysgol Gynradd Talybont Primary, Ceredigion;

Secondary:

Croesyceiliog Comprehensive, Cwmbran;
Alun High, Mold;
Ysgol Friars, Bangor.
Duffryn High, Newport;
Cathays High, Cardiff;
Bryn Gwyn Comprehensive, Llanelli.

Careers Service

Mr. Caton: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales if he will make a statement on the future structure and objectives of the Careers Service in Wales. [85089]

Mr. Hain: The recently published Education and Training Action Group report proposes the establishment of an all-Wales all-age careers information, advice and guidance service by April 2001. Under this proposal, the existing Careers Service companies would be branded together as 'Careers Wales' and would take on responsibility for providing careers information and guidance to adults as well as to young people. The ETAG report also suggests that there may be advantage in reducing the number of Careers Service companies and re-aligning their boundaries to match those of the four economic regions of Wales. These proposals will be for the National Assembly of Wales to consider.

The objectives for the Careers Service in Wales were set out in 'Requirements and Guidance for Providers' (March 1995), a copy of which is available in the Library of the House. These objectives covered the initial five year contracts of the Careers Service companies in Wales. Objectives for future years will be for the National Assembly to determine.

FOREIGN AND COMMONWEALTH AFFAIRS

Russian Government (Arms Supplies)

Mr. Cox: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what representations he has made to the Government of Russia about the supply of weapons to countries in the Middle East. [85333]

Ms Quin: During my right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary's visit to Russia from 3–5 March, he discussed with Foreign Minister Ivanov the dangers of arms exports and assistance to countries of concern, including in the Middle East. Officials also discuss weapons exports with the Russians during regular contacts on export control and strategic stability issues.

Pakistan and India

Mr. Gordon Prentice: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what recent discussions he has had with the Governments of Pakistan and India concerning their signing of the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty. [85331]

Mr. Tony Lloyd: We continue to urge both Pakistan and India to sign and ratify the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty.

My right hon. Friend the Deputy Prime Minister raised this issue with senior members of the Indian Government during his visit to India in March.

My right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary will have a further opportunity to discuss this when he meets the Pakistani Foreign Minister, Sartaj Aziz, in London on 2 June.

Crowd Recognition Devices

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what reports he has received that devices, used to recognise individuals in crowds, have been used by states subject to export restrictions by the UK, where those devices have been exported by the UK. [85212]

Mr. Tony Lloyd: I refer the hon. Gentleman to the answer I gave him on 21 April 1999, *Official Report*, column 566. The Government do not control the export of crowd recognition devices for identifying individuals at rallies or other such events. We are therefore unaware of any exports of such equipment from the UK.

Applications to export controlled goods and technology to all destinations are treated on a case by case basis against our national criteria and the EU Code of Conduct on Arms Exports. The list of countries subject to specific export restrictions, including arms embargoes, is contained in the Summary of Government Commitments regarding the application of Strategic Export Controls, copies of which are in the Libraries of the House.

HOME DEPARTMENT

Coroners Offices

Mr. Burden: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will list the coroners offices in England and Wales, together with their addresses and the local authority areas covered by each. [85476]

Mr. George Howarth: I shall write to my hon. Friend with details, but information about coroners and their offices is available from standard published police and court directories.

Mr. Eric Mann

Mr. Flynn: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what communications there were between his Department and the Prison Service on 18 and 19 May concerning the proposed visit to Westminster by Mr. Eric Mann. [85456]

Mr. George Howarth *[holding answer 25 May 1999]:* Mr. Eric Mann is serving two consecutive six-month prison sentences (one for cultivating and possessing cannabis for personal use, the other for breach of a suspended prison sentence imposed for similar offences) at Prescoed prison.

The Prison Service communicated with the office of my right hon. and noble Friend Lord Williams of Mostyn, the prisons and probation Minister, on 19 May. This was to alert the Minister to Mr. Mann's temporary release from prison and his intended participation in a press conference during his visit to Westminster.

Subsequently, the Prison Service made a decision to amend the conditions of Mr. Mann's release. Ministers took no part in any of the Prison Service's subsequent decision-making regarding Mr. Mann's licence. They were, however, advised of the decisions made.

Private Communications

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department (1) if he will make a statement on the effect of the Users Network/Service Providers Technical Requirements Resolution, and the Mutual Legal Assistance Convention, on access to private communications by *(a)* United Kingdom and *(b)* foreign surveillance bodies; and if prior request for a warrant will always apply; [85270]

(2) if he will estimate the cost of implementing the *(a)* User Network/Service Providers Technical Requirements Resolution and *(b)* Mutual Legal Assistance Convention; and what representations he has received on them. [85238]

Kate Hoey: The draft Convention on Mutual Legal Assistance Convention in Criminal Matters between the Member States of the European Union requires the requesting Member State to obtain authority for interception under its domestic law before making a request. The requested Member State is also required to obtain a warrant in accordance with national law where the

subject of the request is on its territory. Any interception on the United Kingdom public telecommunications network will, therefore, continue to require a warrant issued by the Secretary of State in accordance with the Interception of Communications Act 1985. The cost of transmitting the intercept product in response to such a request falls to the requesting Member State.

The draft Convention also provides a legal basis for the "service provider" solution to satellite interception. It places an obligation on Member States not to prevent satellite telecommunication operators from making their facilities available for the purpose of complying with an interception warrant issued by another Member State, provided that the subject of the interception is on the territory of the Member State ordering the interception. It does not, however, impose any obligations or costs on satellite operators to make such facilities available.

The draft Convention also contains a number of non-interception provisions. These are not expected to have any significant financial implications for the United Kingdom. Indeed, simpler and quicker procedures for seeking and providing legal assistance under the draft Convention could result in some cost savings.

The draft Council Resolution on the lawful interception of communications in respect of new technologies is intended to supplement an existing 1995 Council Resolution. Its purpose is to make clear that law enforcement agencies have similar interception requirements for traditional telephony and new technologies such as the Internet and satellite communications.

The 1995 Council Resolution has not been incorporated in United Kingdom law, and, therefore, does not place obligations on telecommunications operators. Similarly, the draft Resolution is not legally binding and will not impose any obligations or costs on satellite operators or Internet Service Providers.

The draft Convention and draft Council Resolution remain under Parliamentary scrutiny in both Houses in accordance with the normal procedures. I am aware of representations from Justice and Liberty.

Home Detention Curfews

Mr. Clappison: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department, pursuant to his answers of 27 April 1999, *Official Report*, column *110* and 18 May 1999, *Official Report*, column *295*, on home detention curfews, how many of the 14 curfewees referred to in the replies committed offences during their period of curfew *(a)* punishable with imprisonment and *(b)* punishable with four years or more imprisonment. [85247]

Mr. George Howarth: Of the 14 curfewees referred to, 13 were charged with offences which were imprisonable. It would not be appropriate to comment on the sentences likely to be imposed by the courts in any individual case. Within the broad statutory limits set by Parliament, sentences are a matter for the courts alone, taking into account all the aggravating and mitigating factors. However, in seven of the cases, the maximum penalty is more than four years' imprisonment.

Millennium Compliance

Mr. Hoyle: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will make a statement on Lancashire Police Force's progress in becoming year 2000 compliant. [85217]

Mr. Boateng: It is important that all police forces in England and Wales take every measure to ensure year 2000 compliance. The Home Office has commissioned an Independent Assessment of all forces, including Lancashire, by Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Constabulary. The results of this survey will be published at the National Infrastructure Forum on 13 July.

Passports

Mr. Gordon Marsden: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what measures he is taking to reduce the current delays in processing passport applications at the UK Passport Agency. [85214]

Mr. Mike O'Brien: The UK Passport Agency is taking a number of measures to ensure that its customers' needs are met. It is prioritising applications received in the post and made in person by customers' declared travel dates, and is meeting these dates for 99.99 per cent. of passports issued. The Agency is employing additional staffing resources, and optimising the efficiency of its examination processes consistent with the need to maintain the integrity and security of its issuing procedures. In order to clear quickly straightforward applications, certain existing passports are being extended for two years.

The Agency is currently experiencing very high seasonal demand for passports and its aim is to continue to meet customers' travel dates and to reduce its turnround time for straightforward applications to ten days by September.

Mr. Gordon Marsden: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what assessment he has made of the current delays in processing passport applications by the UK Passport Agency. [85213]

Mr. Mike O'Brien: The current delays in processing passport applications by the UK Passport Agency have arisen as a result of problems with the implementation in the Liverpool and Newport passport offices of new high technology driven passport issuing arrangements, together with high seasonal demand for passports. This has increased the processing times for straightforward non-urgent applications.

My assessment of the present operational situation is that it is extremely serious, particularly in the Liverpool passport office. I am receiving reports weekly from the Agency's Chief Executive on the operational position, and the measures being taken to improve it.

In order to satisfactorily meet its customers' needs, the Passport Agency is prioritising applications by customers' declared travel dates, and is meeting these dates for 99.99 per cent. of passports issued. The Agency's aim is to continue to meet customers' travel dates, and reduce its turnround times for straightforward passport applications to ten days by September.

Metropolitan Police

Mr. Cox: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what action he is taking to enhance the recruitment, retention and promotion of black and Asian police officers in the Metropolitan Police Force. [85334]

Kate Hoey: I refer my hon. Friend to the reply given to my hon. Friend the Member for Bolton, North-East (Mr. Crausby) on 26 April 1999, *Official Report*, columns *17–18*.

Immigration and Nationality Directorate

Fiona Mactaggart: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will place in the Library copies of *(a)* the Statement of Service Requirements issued to the companies shortlisted to bid for the Immigration and Nationality Directorate's Casework Programme and *(b)* the casework business model produced by Sema following its 1994 study. [84974]

Mr. Mike O'Brien: I will arrange for copies of both documents to be placed in the Library.

Passport Office, Liverpool

Mr. Martlew: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what is the waiting time to receive a passport from the Liverpool passport office; and if he will make a statement. [85056]

Mr. Mike O'Brien: The Liverpool passport office's current processing time for non-urgent straightforward passport applications is 49 days. Urgent requests are being given priority and 99.99 per cent. of urgent dates are being met. In practice, 65 per cent. of the Liverpool office intake is processed in under 20 days.

Passport applications are taking longer than normal to process at the Liverpool office as a result of operational problems arising from the implementation of new high technology driven passport issuing arrangements. Also, Liverpool are dealing with very high seasonal demand for passports with intake of applications since April 1999 over 20 per cent. up on the same period in 1998.

The Agency's aim is to continue to meet customers travel dates, and to reduce its turnround time for straightforward applications to ten days by September.

Voluntary Sector Grants

Mr. Stephen Twigg: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what steps he is taking to publish the statistics on central Government department grants to the voluntary sector for the last two years. [85355]

Mr. Boateng: The collection of information relating to grants made by Government Departments to the voluntary sector over the period 1995–96 to 1997–98 is nearly complete. The figures will be published as soon as possible.

Prisons (Drug-free Units)

Mrs. Ann Winterton: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many drug-free units there are in prisons in England and Wales; and if he will list the prisons in which they operate. [85443]

Mr. George Howarth: There are approximately 4,000 voluntary testing places covering one third of prisons in England and Wales. We have commissioned a survey of the current provision of drug-free units. I will write to the hon. Member with the results when they become available.

Prison Officers (Complaints)

Mr. Stinchcombe: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many complaints of ill-treatment have been lodged against prison officers in each of the last five years. [84945]

Mr. George Howarth: I regret that information is not collected in this form.

Tote

Mr. Baker: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department who owns the Tote. [85482]

Mr. George Howarth: The Horserace Totalisator Board is a non-departmental public body whose members are appointed by the Home Secretary. The Board is responsible for the assets owned by the Tote, but the Tote itself is owned by no one.

Mentally Disordered Offenders

Helen Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will list the police forces in England and Wales which have produced guidance for their officers on dealing with mentally disordered offenders. [85389]

Mr. Boateng: National guidance on mentally disordered offenders was issued to the police and other agencies in the criminal justice system in September 1990 and a revision issued in April 1996. Chief officers were asked to ensure that all their officers were aware of the circular. Information is not held centrally on the number of chief officers who have issued other guidance on mentally disordered offenders to their officers, but some are known to have done so.

In respect of Cheshire Constabulary, detailed policy and guidance to operational officers on dealing with mentally disordered offenders was issued in 1994 and was last revised in 1998. All local policing divisions have nominated officers of inspector rank who are responsible for the implementation of those guidelines and for maintaining locally based protocols with other agencies.

Helen Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what training is currently provided for police officers in England and Wales on dealing with mentally disordered offenders. [85390]

Mr. Boateng: As part of their probationer training, all recruits to the police service in England and Wales receive awareness training on persons suffering from mental disability. This training is supplemented by practical role play exercises which can be used to reinforce learning. In addition to the content of the former probationer training curriculum, forces may provide further training on the needs of mentally disordered persons, if there was a particular local need for this. Sergeants who act as custody officers receive further, more detailed, training in the Custody Officer Training Programme which, although

designed centrally, is available for delivery by forces. A training video, produced by the National Schizophrenic Fellowship in collaboration with the Metropolitan Police and the Association of Chief Police Officers, and designed to help officers to identify and cope with mentally disordered persons, is also available to all police forces.

Mr. R. A. J. Coe

Mr. Lidington: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department when he expects to make an offer under Option C of the Firearms Compensation Scheme to Mr. R. A. J. Coe (reference FCS 052048). [85477]

Mr. Boateng: A payment offer will be made this week.

Feltham Young Offenders Institution

Mr. Moore: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department when he expects the taskforce chaired by the Director General of the Prison Service to report to him on the management of Her Majesty's Young Offenders Institution and Remand Centre, Feltham. [85485]

Mr. George Howarth: The Director General established a taskforce to take forward the recommendations made by the Chief Inspector of Prisons in his report on the inspection of Feltham. The Director General chairs a steering group to which the taskforce reports. The taskforce has submitted four reports to the steering group on various aspects of the Chief Inspector's report on Feltham. The steering group is expected to report to Ministers shortly.

CABINET OFFICE

Biotechnology

Mr. Alan Simpson: To ask the Minister for the Cabinet Office if he will place in the Library a copy of the Government's central co-ordinated rebuttals strategy for use following his oral statement of 21 May 1999, *Official Report*, columns 1371–73, on biotechnology. [85491]

Dr. Jack Cunningham: The Government's strategy is to encourage open, rational and well informed debate. This is the best way to safeguard the public interest. On 21 May I made a series of announcements including the publication of a review of the regulatory framework, and a report from the Chief Medical Officer and the Chief Scientific Adviser on public health implications of genetically modified foods. These will provide the foundation for such a debate.

HEALTH

Cancer

Mr. Paul Marsden: To ask the Secretary of State for Health (1) if he will estimate the cost of creating, reviewing and maintaining an internet directory of cancer care services; and if he will make a statement; [84240]

(2) what plans he has to introduce and maintain an internet directory of cancer care services and information; and if he will make a statement. [84239]

Mr. Hutton: The Government's Information Management and Technology strategy for the National Health Service "Information for Health", published in September last year, called for (amongst other things) the creation of a National Electronic Library for Health (NELH) of accredited healthcare information that would be made available to patients, the public and healthcare professionals.

One element of the NELH is the provision of information about cancer services. The cost of providing these is estimated at £75,000. The NELH project will be working with voluntary organisations with patient representative groups to promote and make available as widely as possible reliable and relevant information on a number of health topics, including cancer.

The NHS Information Authority is currently working in collaboration with the NHS Executive and the Centre for Health Information Quality to identify the costs and options for creating, reviewing and maintaining online healthcare information services. A business plan will be put to the NHS Information Authority with the objective of creating the NELH by the end of the year.

Myalgic Encephalomyelitis

Mr. Burstow: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will make it his policy to commission research into the causes of ME and the development of appropriate diagnostic procedure. [84574]

Mr. Hutton *[holding answer 18 May 1999]:* The Chronic Fatigue Syndrome/Myalgic Encephalomyelitis Working Group which has been convened by the Chief Medical Officer will specifically address the question of diagnostic criteria and will also make recommendations about the need to identify and commission further research into CFS/ME. The working group is already putting together a submission for a systematic literature review which will look at which treatments are effective and sub-groups. This will be considered by the Department's Policy Research Programme.

Pollution

Mr. Brake: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will list the studies his Department has funded since January 1998 to investigate the effects of pollution on health, with particular reference to pollution from *(a)* landfill sites, *(b)* factories and *(c)* exposure to chemicals in the home; and when these studies were or will be published. [84897]

Ms Jowell: This Department has carried out and commissioned a number of studies on the health effects of pollution since January 1998, many jointly with other Government Departments. The details of these studies have been placed in the Library. It is not the Department's policy to publish the findings separately, though researchers are encouraged to publish their findings in peer—reviewed journals and in the scientific press, on completion of the studies. The vast majority are disseminated in this way.

This Department, together with the Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions has co-funded an indoor air pollution research programme as well as research into the non-auditory health effects of noise and the health effects of chemicals in the environment.

Together with the DETR and the Health and Safety Executive (HSE), it has cofunded a programme of work on trends in male reproductive health and the possible influences of occupational and environmental chemicals. Also, together with DETR, HSE, the Scottish Office, the Welsh Office and the Department of Health and Social Services in Northern Ireland the Department contributes towards a contract with the Imperial College of Science, Technology and Medicine to form the Small Area Health Statistics Unit (SAHSU). SAHSU has also carried out research on the effects of air pollution on health, since January 1998.

The Department also manages the National Health Service research and development levy which is used to support research and development of relevance to the National Health Service in hospitals, general practice and other health care settings, and to fund the NHS research and development programme. In addition, the Medical Research Council—which receives most of its income via grant-in-aid from the office of my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry—funds medical research as part of the Government's funding of the science and engineering base.

In addition to those projects listed, the Department expects to issue a major call for proposals on the effects of air pollution on health over the summer and a call for further research on the effects on health of landfill sites.

HIV/AIDS

Mr. Gerrard: To ask the Secretary of State for Health (1) what consultation the regional NHS executive offices will carry out before distributing HIV/AIDS treatment and care money recently allocated to them with *(a)* people with HIV and *(b)* providers of HIV services; [85065]

(2) by what date regional NHS executive offices will distribute the £6.2 million HIV/AIDS treatment and care money recently allocated to them. [85064]

Ms Jowell: The guidance issued to regional offices for the distribution of the additional £6.2 million for HIV/AIDS treatment and care made it clear that the funds were to be used to assist with the extra costs of combination therapies for those with a clinical need. The guidance also recommended that ROs consult with others, including their constituent health authorities and their regional Specialised Commissioning Group where appropriate, before distributing the funds.

Regional Offices may also consult other groups or individuals before making their final decision. The guidance to Regional Offices does not specify a date by which the allocations totalling £6.2 million are to be made. Most Regional Offices are currently in the process of deciding, in consultation with others, the basis for the distribution to health authorities.

The forthcoming guidance to the National Health Service on the use to be made of this sum, and the balance of the HIV/AIDS treatment and care and HIV prevention funds, includes the requirement for Regional Offices to submit a separate report to Ministers at the year end on the use of the £6.2 million allocated to them.

Oral Contraceptives

Dr. Tony Wright: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how many deaths of women have been caused by use of a combined oral contraceptive in the last 10 years; and in each case what was *(a)* the reaction that caused the death and *(b)* the product. [85038]

Mr. Denham: In the last ten years, between 20 May 1989 and 20 May 1999, there have been a total of 2,408 adverse reactions suspected to be associated with the combined oral contraceptive pill received through the United Kingdom's Yellow Card adverse drug reaction reporting scheme. A fatal outcome was reported in 104 of these reports as listed in the table. The 104 deaths reported over ten years need to be taken in the context of around three million women taking the Pill each year in the UK.

Not all deaths suspected to be related to the use of the combined oral contraceptives are reported to the Medicine Control Agency/Committee on Safety of Medicines via the Yellow Card spontaneous adverse drug reaction scheme; we therefore cannot provide the total number of deaths. It is also essential to bear in mind that a report of a suspected adverse drug reaction does not mean that the reaction/death was caused by the medicine concerned. Many other factors are likely to contribute.

The Pill is highly effective in preventing pregnancy. The risks of fatal adverse reactions associated with combined oral contraceptive Pills are very small; and are much smaller than those associated with pregnancy.

The product information on the Pill provided for doctors, as well as the patient information leaflet in each pack, give advice on the contraindications, side effects, warnings and precautions for use of the Pill which should be strictly adhered to.

Suspected reaction	*Number of cases with a fatal outcome*
Cardiac failure	1
Sudden death unexplained	1
Left ventricular failure	1
Myocardial infarction	5
Pulmonary embolism	84
Subarachnoidhemorrhage	1
Cerebral vein thrombosis	1
Brain stem infarction	1
Cerebral infarction	2
Cerebrovascular accident	1
Cerebral thrombosis	2
Chest pain	1
Pelvic venous thrombosis	1
Respiratory arrest	1
Ovarian Carcinoma	1

Products associated with the suspected adverse reactions include: Binovum; Brevinor; Cilest; Conova; Diane; Dianette; Eugynon; Femodene; Femodene ED; Gynovlar; Loestrin; Logynon; Logynon ED; Marvelon; Mercilon; Microgynon; Minilyn; Minulet; Norimin; Ovran; Ovran 30; Ovranette; Ovulen; Ovysmen; Synphase; Tri-minulet; Trinordiol and Trinovum.

Infertility Treatment

Mr. Cox: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how many people used infertility services in National Health Service hospitals in each of the last three years. [85084]

Mr. Hutton: Information about hospital episodes for patients receiving in-patient treatment for infertility for the financial years 1995–96, 1996–97 and 1997–98 is shown in the table. During a course of treatment for infertility an individual may have more than one hospital episode. Treatment under other operation codes may be related to infertility. However, the codes given correspond as closely as possible to the information requested.

Operation code	*1995–96*	*1996–97*[1]	*1997–98*[1]
Q13—Introduction of gamete into uterine cavity	1,996	1,593	1,716
Q38.3—Endoscopic injection into fallopian tube	227	186	116
Q41—Other operations on fallopian tube	11,138	8,327	7,558
Q56.1—Fertility investigation of female (not elsewhere classified)	4	8	4
Total	13,365	10,114	9,394

[1] Figures for 1996–97 and 1997–98 are provisional, no adjustments have been made for shortfalls in data, (ie the data are ungrossed)
Source:
Hospital Episode Statistics
Department of Health: Statistics Division SD2B

Child Protection

Mr. Cox: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what discussions his Department has had with the Council of Europe on joint policies for the welfare and protectio of children. [85088]

Mr. Hutton: Officials from the Department contribute to the work of the Council of Europe on issues related to the welfare and protection of children, through the formal Committee structure of the Council of Europe. I am due to participate in a Council of Europe Conference of Ministers responsible for Family Affairs in Stockholm on 14–16 June, where the theme will be "Towards a Child-Friendly Society". In preparation for the Conference the United Kingdom has provided a National Report on "child-friendly" initiatives.

Alzheimer's Disease

Mr. Cox: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will estimate the incidence of Alzheimer's disease in England and Wales. [85215]

Mr. Hutton: There are no data specifically relating to the incidence of Alzheimer's disease in England and Wales. The overall incidence rate after the age of 65 across Western Europe is 18.3 cases per 1,000 person years.

It is estimated that approximately 600,000 people over 65, or 5 per cent. of that population in the United Kingdom, suffer from dementia. Alzheimer's Disease accounts for just over half.

Medicines Control Agency

Mr. Tredinnick: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how many Enforcement Officers the Medicines Control Agency currently employs; what changes there have been in this number in the past year; and what plans there are to increase this number. [85222]

Ms Jowell *[holding answer 24 May 1999]:* There are 23 Enforcement Officers working within the Enforcement Group who deal solely with criminal investigations into allegations that medicines legislation has been breached.

There has been an increase of approximately 12 per cent. in the number of Enforcement Officers in the last 12 months, reflecting an increase in the work load. There are no plans further to increase the number at present but this area of the Agency's responsibilities is kept under careful review so as to ensure the protection of public health can be maintained.

National Institute for Clinical Excellence

Mr. Burstow: To ask the Secretary of State for Health when he plans to publish his response to the results of his Department's consultation on the work of the National Institute for Clinical Excellence. [85444]

Mr. Denham *[holding answer 25 May 1999]:* About 160 replies were received to the consultation on "Faster access to modern treatment", a discussion paper setting out detailed proposals for appraisal by the National Institute for Clinical Excellence. Officials are following up a number of detailed points with the organisations concerned. Final decisions will be announced in due course.

Listening to Women

Mrs. May: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what the cost has been of the Listening to Women roadshows; and how many women have attended each roadshow to date. [85377]

Ms Jowell *[holding answer 25 May 1999]:* To date, nine Listening to Women roadshow events have taken place, attended by 1,125 women. Still to take place are the Leeds, Nottingham and Welsh events. The breakdown is:

	Attended by
Manchester	83
London	74
Norwich	67
Birmingham	58
Bristol	87
Newcastle	89
Reading	59
Glasgow	c. 500
Belfast	108
Total cost	[1]£87,918.54

[1] Including Value Added Tax

Abortion

Ms Julie Morgan: To ask the Secretary of State for Health (1) what guidelines have been issued to GPs on the action they should take regarding their patients if they hold a conscientious objection to abortion; [84991]

(2) what plans he has, following Mr. Justice Alliott's judgment in the High Court case of Dr. Sheila Matthews, to issue new advice or guidelines to GPs about referring patients to another doctor if they have a conscientious objection to abortion. [84992]

Ms Jowell *[holding answer 25 May 1999]:* In 1991 the General Medical Services Council of the British Medical Association issued guidance to general practitioners through Local Medical Committees, reminding them of their obligations under their terms of service. That guidance remains extant and GPs who have a conscientious objection to abortion should refer the patient to another doctor as soon as possible.

Regional directors of the National Health Service Executive have been asked to ensure that Primary Care Groups have arrangements in place so that women considering an abortion are able to have easy access to a GP who can make a referral where appropriate.

Vaccines (Bovine Material)

Mr. Baker: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what assessment he has made of the evidence given by Mrs. Edwina Currie to the BSE Inquiry in respect of the use of vaccines which in their early stage of manufacture had used bovine material prohibited for use in human food *(a)* in general and *(b)* in relation to the level of risk relating to injecting infected material. [85493]

Ms Jowell: It is for the independent bovine spongiform encephalopathy Inquiry to assess the evidence given to it, not my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State. The Government will respond to the Inquiry's report after it is published.

Long-term Care

Mr. Field: To ask the Secretary of State for Health (1) what proportion of *(a)* those people who have been in long-term care or nursing homes for four years or more and *(b)* all people in long-term care or nursing homes continue to pay part or all of their fees; [85226]

(2) if he will estimate the average cost of four years' care in a nursing home. [85228]

Mr. Hutton: I refer my hon. Friend to the reply I gave him on 24 May 1999, *Official Report*, column *20*.

High Security Hospitals (Staffing)

Helen Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how many posts are currently vacant in each high-security hospital for *(a)* nurses, *(b)* nursing assistants, *(c)* occupational therapists, *(d)* forensic psychologists and *(e)* psychiatrists. [85388]

Mr. Hutton: The number of posts currently vacant for nurses, nursing assistants, occupational therapists, forensic psychologists and psychiatrists at each of the three high security hospitals are set out in the tables.

	Posts currently vacant
Rampton Hospital	
Qualified nurses	20
Nursing Assistants	0
Occupational therapists	2
Forensic psychologists	3
Psychiatrists	2
Broadmoor Hospital	
Qualified nurses	36 (20 qualified nurses in the appointment process)
Nursing assistants	24 (15 unqualified nurses in the selection process)
Occupational therapists	3 (only 8 posts in the whole establishment and 3 staff on full-time secondment training at present)
Forensic psychologists	0
Psychiatrists	3
Ashworth Hospital	
Qualified nurses	34
Nursing assistants	24 (current recruitment drive will enable these vacancies to be filled within the next 2–3 weeks)
Occupational therapists	3
Forensic psychologists	1
Psychiatrists	
Consultant posts	7
Staff grade	1

Interstitial Cystitis

Mr. David Taylor: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what publicly funded research is being carried out into the causes of interstitial cystitis; and if he will make a statement. [84970]

Mr. Hutton: A body of international research evidence is published in the world-wide literature and details of work supported by the Department are on the National Research Register in the Library and on the internet at *http://www.doh.gov.uk/nrr.htm*. In addition, the Medical Research Council is funding basic research, including the study of molecules and cells, genetics, infections and immunity, which will inform future research in this area.

In the National Health Service research and development programme, priorities take account of widespread consultation with those using, delivering and managing services, within a framework overseen by the Central Research and Development Committee for the NHS.

We have asked those who manage the priority setting process to ensure that interstitial cystitis is included in consideration of future research priorities.

NHS Trust Mergers

Mr. Hopkins: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will list those NHS trusts that have *(a)* been created, *(b)* merged and *(c)* been dissolved since 1 April 1998. [85147]

Mr. Denham: The information requested is contained in the table. All of these mergers took effect from 1 April 1999.

Region	Trusts established or amended	Merged/dissolved or absorbed trusts
Eastern	Local Health Partnerships NHS Trust	Allington NHS Trust, Mid Anglia Community Health NHS Trust and East Suffolk Community NHS Trust (3 into 1)
Eastern	Bedfordshire and Luton Community NHS Trust	Bedford and Shire Health NHS Trust and South Bedfordshire NHS Trust (2 into 1)
London	Ealing Hammersmith and Fulham Mental Health NHS Trust and Brent Kensington Chelsea and Westminster Mental Health NHS Trust	West London NHS Trust, North West London Mental Health NHS Trust, and Riverside Mental Health NHS Trust (3 into 2)
London	North West London Hospitals NHS Trust	Northwick Park and St. Marks NHS Trust and Central Middlesex Hospital NHS Trust (2 into 1)
London	Parkside Health NHS Trust	Royal London Homoeopathic NHS Trust and Parkside Health NHS Trust (2 into 1—Absorption)
London	The Barnet and Chase Farm Hospitals NHS Trust	Wellhouse NHS Trust and Chase Farm Hospital NHS Trust (2 into 1)
London	South West London Community NHS Trust	Merton and Sutton Community NHS Trust, Wandsworth Community Healthcare NHS Trust and Richmond Twickenham and Roehampton Community Services NHS Trust (3 into 1)
London	South London and Maudsley Mental Health NHS Trust and Community Health South London NHS Trust	Optimum Mental Health NHS Trust, Bethlem and Maudsley Mental Health NHS Trust, Lambeth Healthcare NHS Trust and Lewisham and Guy's Mental Health NHS Trust (4 into 2)
London	The Epsom and St. Helier NHS Trust	St. Helier NHS Trust and Epsom NHS Trust (2 into 1)
North West	North Sefton and West Lancashire Community NHS Trust and Southport and Ormskirk Hospital NHS Trust	Southport and Formby Health Services NHS Trust, Southport and Formby Community NHS Trust and West Lancashire NHS Trust (3 into 2)
Northern and Yorkshire	North East Ambulance Service NHS Trust	Northumbria Ambulance Service NHS Trust and Durham County Ambulance Service NHS Trust (2 into 1)
Northern and Yorkshire	Tees, East and North Yorkshire Ambulance Service NHS Trust	Cleveland Ambulance Service NHS Trust, Humberside Ambulance Service NHS Trust and North Yorkshire Ambulance Service NHS Trust (3 into 1)
Northern and Yorkshire	North Tees and Hartlepool NHS Trust and Tees and North East Yorkshire NHS Trust	Hartlepool and East Durham NHS Trust, South Tees Community and Mental Health NHS Trust and North Tees Health NHS Trust (3 into 2)
South East	Surrey Oaklands NHS Trust	Life Care NHS Trust and Surrey Oaklands NHS Trust (2 into 1—Absorption)
South East	East Kent Hospitals NHS Trust	South Kent Hospitals NHS Trust, Kent and Canterbury Hospitals NHS Trust and Thanet Healthcare NHS Trust (3 into 1)
South West	North Bristol NHS Trust	Frenchay Healthcare NHS Trust and Southmead Health Services NHS Trust (2 into 1)
South West	Cornwall Healthcare NHS Trust	Cornwall Healthcare NHS Trust and Trecare NHS Trust (2 into 1)
Trent	Leicestershire and Rutland Healthcare NHS Trust	Fosse Health NHS Trust and Leicestershire Mental Health Services NHS Trust (2 into 1)
Trent	Central Sheffield University Hospitals NHS Trust	Central Sheffield University Hospitals NHS Trust and Weston Park Hospital NHS Trust (2 into 1)
Trent	South Lincolnshire Healthcare NHS Trust	Mulberry NHS Trust and South Lincolnshire NHS Trust (2 into 1)
Trent	East Midlands Ambulance Service NHS Trust	Derbyshire Ambulance Services NHS Trust, Nottinghamshire Ambulance Services NHS Trust and Leicestershire Ambulance Services NHS Trust (3 into 1)
Trent	Lincoln District Healthcare NHS Trust	West Lindsey NHS Trust and Lincoln and District Healthcare NHS Trust (2 into 1—Absorption). Lincoln and Louth Hospitals NHS Trust has taken on some of the service provision of West Lindsey but are not part of the merger. All staff and assets have transferred to Lincoln District Healthcare

ENVIRONMENT, TRANSPORT AND THE REGIONS

Genetically Modified Crops

Mr. Stinchcombe: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions how many acres of land in the UK were cultivated as trial sites of genetically modified crops in each of the last five years; and how many acres of land will be cultivated as trial sites of GM crops in 1999. [83283]

Mr. Meacher: In 1998, the area cultivated as trial sites of genetically modified crops was approximately 300 hectares. In the current year, the total figure, including the farmscale evaluations, is expected to be about the same. These are approximate figures because consents for releases are granted on the basis of a maximum area that can be grown and companies do not necessarily sow all the area for which they have approval. Figures for earlier years are not available, but were no more than the 1998 levels.

Mr. Yeo: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will publish the research commissioned by his Department into the cross-contamination between genetically modified crops and crops that are not genetically modified. [84535]

Mr. Meacher *[holding answer 17 May 1999]:* Yes, all reports from research commissioned by the Government into the cross-pollination of genetically modified (GM) crops and non-GM crops are published. Gene transfer in oilseed rape was considered in my Department's Research Report No.12, Investigation of Feral Oilseed Rape Populations, a copy of which is in the Library. Ongoing research commissioned by MAFF on pollen transfer will be published when the work is complete.

Mr. Baker: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will make a statement on differences in his policy in respect of GM crops on *(a)* limited commercial planting and *(b)* farm-scale trials. [85363]

Mr. Meacher *[holding answer 25 May 1999]:* There are no differences in policy, the growing of all GM crops must be covered by a valid consent issued in accordance with Directive 90/220/EEC on the deliberate release into the environment of genetically modified organisms. Before a consent is granted the applicant must have carried out an assessment of the risks posed to the environment and demonstrated compliance with all aspects of the directive. Those crops planted as part of the farmscale evaluations will in addition be studied for ecological effects in comparison with equivalent non-GM crops.

EC Directive 90/220/EEC

Mr. Stinchcombe: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what plans he has to propose to his European partners amendments to EC Directive 90/220/EEC. [83261]

Mr. Meacher: The Government are currently negotiating the amendment of Directive 90/220/EEC. The European Commission published its proposal for the amendment of the Directive in February 1998. An orientation debate was held in June 1998 under the United Kingdom Presidency, and detailed negotiations took place in the Council Working Group under the Austrian Presidency in the second half of last year. At the December Environment Council, Ministers agreed that while substantial progress had been made, further detailed negotiations were required to resolve many of the outstanding issues. The German Presidency has indicated it will seek to reach a common position at the June Environment Council.

The position of the Government with regard to the original Commission proposal has been laid out in Explanatory Memorandum 6378/98, submitted to the House of Commons on 23 March 1998. In response to a request from the House of Commons European Scrutiny Committee, I wrote to the committee on 27 November with details of the Government's priorities in the negotiations. A Scrutiny debate was held in the House of Commons European Standing Committee A on 24 March 1999, and the Government submitted a further Explanatory Memorandum (7138/99) on 30 April following the publication of the Commission's amended proposal taking account of the publication of the European Parliament's Opinion.

The priorities of the Government are to ensure that the revised Directive meets growing public concerns regarding ethical, environmental and social issues and achieves a more transparent regulatory regime. In addition, the Government support many of the amendments proposed by the European Parliament and incorporated into the amended Commission Proposal. In particular, the Government welcome changes to clarify the requirements for the environmental risk assessment, the stronger requirements for public information and consultation, and a new Article on consultation of the Commission's ethical committee.

All of these documents are available in the House of Commons Library.

Heavy Goods Vehicles

Mr. Nicholas Winterton: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what estimate he has made of the cost per heavy goods vehicle of the fitting of an exhaust system incorporating a particulates trap in order to attract the reduction in vehicle excise duty announced in his Budget statement. [83824]

Ms Glenda Jackson: The Government's assessment of the current cost of retrofitting a particulate trap to a heavy goods vehicle is between £3,000 and £4,500, compared with the maximum Vehicle Excise Duty reduction of £1,000 when vehicles meet the emissions standards required to receive a Reduced Pollution Certificate. The cost for smaller vehicles is at the lower end of this scale, increasing to the upper figure for the largest and most powerful lorries. It is expected that the cost of emissions reduction technologies will fall as the market for them grows, leading to competition between manufacturers and economies of scale in the production of devices.

Drinking and Driving Laws

Mr. Kidney: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what conclusions

he has reached from his analysis of the responses received to the consultation about possible changes to the law relating to drinking and driving. [84369]

Ms Glenda Jackson: We are still considering how best to take forward the matters raised in the consultation document in the light of the responses received and in the broader context of road safety policy. Our conclusions will be incorporated within the road safety strategy which we will publish later this year.

Non-genetically Modified Soya Beans

Joan Ruddock: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what reports his Department has received concerning the efforts of the state Government of Rio Grande do Sul to guarantee non-genetically modified soya bean production throughout their state; and what plans his Department has to give assistance. [84500]

Mr. Meacher: I met the Secretary of Agriculture for the Brazilian State of Rio Grande do Sul on 13 May at his request to hear about the ability of his State to supply non genetically modified soya to UK customers. We shall certainly take this information into account in sourcing for the future and I have agreed to a further exchange of information at official level.

Regional Development Agencies

Mr. Blizzard: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will list *(a)* the names and current employers of the board members of each regional development agency and *(b)* the names and previous employers of the senior management team appointed by each regional development agency. [84714]

Mr. Meale: The information requested has been placed in the Library of the House.

Telecommunications Masts

Dr. Ladyman: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions (1) what assessment he has made of the official guidance on the minimum distance between mobile telephone and other communication masts and *(a)* residential property, *(b)* schools and colleges and *(c)* places of business in (i) other EU countries, (ii) Scandinavian countries, (iii) the United States of America and (iv) Canada; [84953]

(2) what discussions he has had with representatives of professional medical opinion on the guidance for the minimum distances between mobile telephone and other communication masts and occupied properties; and if he will make a statement. [84954]

Mr. Raynsford: The Government's statutory advisers on radiological protection matters are the National Radiological Protection Board (NRPB). The Board's advice to Government is based upon a continuing review and assessment of published scientific studies covering the fields of biology and medicine, epidemiology and dosimetry.

The NRPB have issued guidelines on limiting exposure to electromagnetic fields (EMFs). This guidance specifies restrictions on the exposure of people, rather than safe distances from equipment, and is related to established health effects of EMFs, such as effects on perception, central nervous system effects and the heating of tissues.

The NRPB advise that radio waves at ground level and in regions accessible to the public tend to be many times below guideline levels and should present no health risk. Telecommunications operators have a duty under the Health and Safety at Work, etc. Act 1974 and the Management of the Health and Safety at Work Regulations 1992 to ensure that their work activities, which would include the operation of their apparatus, do not present a risk to employees and the general public. The practical effect of the combination of the NRPB guidelines and health and safety legislation should be that people are kept at a safe distance from sources of EMFs.

The NRPB also advise that there is no convincing evidence of a causal effect between exposure to EMFs and other health effects, such as cancer, and that published human health studies relating to these do not provide a basis for advice on setting exposure standards.

The Government continue to monitor international work on the possible health effects of EMFs and to gather information on worldwide practice on the limitation of public exposure to EMFs. The UK has also participated actively in negotiations of the proposed EU Recommendation on this subject and in the World Health Organisation's International EMF Project. We shall continue to take international practice and research results into consideration in taking forward policy on this matter, including in developing guidance on land use planning and electromagnetic fields.

Abandoned Vehicles

Mr. McDonnell: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions (1) what powers are available to *(a)* the DVLA and *(b)* local authorities to remove abandoned vehicles on the public highway; [84980]

(2) what plans he has to review the powers and procedures exercised by *(a)* the DVLA and *(b)* local authorities for the removal of abandoned vehicles from the public highway; [84981]

(3) what estimate he has made of the cost of the removal of abandoned vehicles from the public highway by (i) local authorities and (ii) the DVLA in each year since 1995–96; [84978]

(4) what procedures exist within his Department for the monitoring of the number of abandoned vehicles on the public highway collected by (i) local authorities and (ii) the DVLA. [84979]

Ms Glenda Jackson: The DVLA has no powers to remove abandoned vehicles on the public highway. Local authorities have powers, under the Refuse Disposal (Amenity) Act 1978 and the Road Traffic Regulation Act 1984, to remove such vehicles. The Removal and Disposal of Vehicles Regulations 1986 prescribes the procedure that should be followed by local authorities. There are no plans at present to review these powers and procedures.

There is no requirement for local authorities to provide information on the costs of removing vehicles. My Department does not monitor the number of abandoned vehicles collected from the public highway by local authorities.

Carlisle Northern Relief Road

Mr. Martlew: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what assistance the Government are giving toward the Carlisle Northern Relief Road. [85042]

Ms Glenda Jackson: Should Cumbria City Council bid for support for this scheme as part of their Local Transport Plan, it would be considered along with other major schemes across the country.

Carbon Dioxide Emissions

Mrs. Brinton: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will estimate the level of carbon dioxide emissions in the United Kingdom in *(a)* 1997 and *(b)* 1998. [85094]

Mr. Meale: Emissions of CO_2 in the UK are estimated to have been 155 million tonnes of carbon in 1997. 1998 emissions are provisionally estimated to have been about 156 million tonnes of carbon, about 1 per cent. higher than in 1997, and 7 per cent. lower than in 1990. The increase between 1997 and 1998 was associated with delays in commissioning and starting up combined cycle gas turbine power stations, planned maintenance at nuclear plant and some reduction in imported electricity.

Petrol

Mr. Hoyle: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions whether the packaging of each available anti-wear additive for petrol will list the functional chemical component and the concentration of its active element when added to unleaded petrol in the recommended amount. [85251]

Ms Glenda Jackson: Information to be provided on additive packaging would be a matter for individual suppliers.

Mr. Hoyle: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions, pursuant to his answer of 13 April 1999, *Official Report*, columns *71–72*, on British Standards, if he will make a statement on *(a)* the early problems in Sweden associated with the lead replacement petrol, *(b)* the reasons for sodium being dropped from the draft standard for lead replacement petrol issued in 1998 and *(c)* what problems were identified in Sweden with the use of sodium in lead replacement petrol and *(d)* whether the problems solely related to the use of sodium. [85248]

Ms Glenda Jackson: Following the introduction in Sweden of Lead Replacement Petrol (LRP) in 1994, an increase in engine component wear was identified by engine repairers. The problems focused upon engine valves and on turbochargers and appeared to have been caused by a phenomenon known as hot corrosion reportedly due to the use of sodium in the fuel. With the emergence of this information, LRP in Sweden was changed to a potassium-based product and once the changeover was complete the incidence of engine damage dropped. During the changeover of the fuels, concern over the use of both sodium and potassium existed, but I understand this mostly disappeared as the use of potassium increased. The British Standards Institution has adopted a precautionary approach by excluding sodium from its draft standard for lead replacement petrol.

Mr. Hoyle: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions whether sodium-based additives to petrol are being marketed in the United Kingdom to the public. [85249]

Ms Glenda Jackson: We are not aware that any petrol supplier is marketing petrol which includes a sodium-based additive. The Federation of British Historic Vehicles has tested and endorsed one self-dosing additive containing sodium.

Mr. Hoyle: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will list the information he has published in the last 12 months on the use of sodium-based additives in petrol. [85250]

Ms Glenda Jackson: The Department has published two advisory leaflets to help motorists who may have concerns about the withdrawal of leaded petrol. These include general information on additives as an alternative to lead, whether already included in lead replacement petrol or provided separately for motorist's use, but do not refer to particular types of additives. Copies of the leaflets have been placed in the House Library and may be viewed on the Internet at www.environment.detr.gov.uk/unleaded/index.htm.

Passenger Transit System

Mr. John M. Taylor: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what was the total cost of the MAGLEV overhead passenger transit system linking Birmingham International Airport and Birmingham International Railway Station project between commissioning initial feasibility studies and abandonment of operation; and if he will make a statement. [85069]

Ms Glenda Jackson: This is a commercial matter for Birmingham International Airport Ltd.

Mr. John M. Taylor: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions who owns the surviving overhead structure of the MAGLEV overhead passenger transit system linking Birmingham International Airport and Birmingham International Railway Station; and if he will make a statement. [85073]

Ms Glenda Jackson: I understand from Birmingham International Airport Ltd that it owns the surviving overhead structure.

Mr. John M. Taylor: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions when the MAGLEV overhead passenger transit system linking Birmingham International Airport and Birmingham International Railway Station was formally commissioned after trials to the intended operator; who the intended operator was; and if he will make a statement. [85067]

Ms Glenda Jackson: I understand from Birmingham International Airport Ltd that the MAGLEV system was formally commissioned on 16 August 1984; and that the intended operator was the airport undertaking as part of the former West Midlands County Council.

Mr. John M. Taylor: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what plans he has to revive the MAGLEV overhead passenger transit system linking Birmingham International Airport and Birmingham International Railway Station; and if he will make a statement. [85071]

Ms Glenda Jackson: Birmingham International Airport Ltd. is committed to reinstating a link between the terminal building and the railway station. It is also subject to a planning obligation in a section 106 planning agreement between the airport company and Solihull Metropolitan Borough Council with reference to the outline planning approval for the extension of the passenger terminal facilities and related infrastructure granted in July 1996. The airport company is considering what form the link should take and how it can best be integrated with the multi-modal interchange which is being planned for the airport.

Mr. John M. Taylor: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions in whom the residual rights and liabilities of the principal design and construction contracts of the MAGLEV overhead passenger transit system linking Birmingham International Airport and Birmingham International Railway Station are now vested; and if he will make a statement. [85075]

Ms Glenda Jackson: I understand from Birmingham International Airport Ltd. that in the agreement between the former West Midlands County Council and the individual joint venture companies, the parties agreed that patents, registered designs or copyrights in the case of mechanical and electrical aspects of the transportation system were to be the property of the individual company undertaking that particular aspect of the work, and that in the case of civil engineering and building aspects of the system intellectual property rights were to be the property of the Council. The airport company is a successor in title to the former Council.

Mr. John M. Taylor: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions who commissioned the initial feasibility studies for the MAGLEV overhead passenger transit system linking Birmingham International Airport and Birmingham International Railway Station and when; who let the contracts for its construction, with whom and when; and if he will make a statement. [85066]

Ms Glenda Jackson: I understand from Birmingham International Airport Ltd. that the initial feasibility studies for the MAGLEV system were commissioned in 1979 by the former West Midlands County Council, which owned Birmingham Airport at that time; and that the contracts for its construction were let by the Council in 1981, as part of the airport's development, with the People Mover Group (GEC, Balfour-Beatty, Brush Electrical Machines and Metropolitan-Cammell) and John Laing.

Mr. John M. Taylor: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what was the total of passenger fares collected in the period of fare-paying operation of the MAGLEV overhead passenger transit system linking Birmingham International Airport and Birmingham International Railway Station. [85070]

Ms Glenda Jackson: I understand from Birmingham International Airport Ltd. that the MAGLEV system always formed part of the airport's essential infrastructure as the link to the railway station and that no fares were ever charged for its use.

Mr. John M. Taylor: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what has become of the passenger cars for the MAGLEV overhead passenger transit system linking Birmingham International Airport and Birmingham International Railway Station and who owns *(a)* them and *(b)* the proceeds of their sale; and if he will make a statement. [85074]

Ms Glenda Jackson: I understand from Birmingham International Airport Ltd. that it still owns the passenger cars and that they remain stored at the airport.

Mr. John M. Taylor: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions when and by whom it was ultimately decided to abandon operation of the MAGLEV overhead passenger transit system linking Birmingham International Airport and Birmingham International Railway Station; and if he will make a statement. [85068]

Ms Glenda Jackson: I understand from Birmingham International Airport Ltd. that it took and implemented this decision in July 1995.

Mr. John M. Taylor: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will estimate the cost of making the MAGLEV overhead passenger transit system linking Birmingham International Airport and Birmingham International Railway Station operational; and if he will make a statement. [85072]

Ms Glenda Jackson: The cost of reinstating a link between the airport and the railway station is a matter for Birmingham International Airport Ltd. It will depend in part on how it is decided to integrate it with the multi-modal interchange which is being planned for the airport. But I understand from the airport company that a study in 1995 concluded that it was not technically feasible to make the MAGLEV system itself operational.

Mr. John M. Taylor: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will list the occasions on which actions for damages were assessed as to liability against a party considered to have been responsible for the failure of the MAGLEV overhead passenger transit system at Birmingham International Airport; and if he will make a statement. [85277]

Ms Glenda Jackson: This is a matter for Birmingham International Airport Ltd.

Asbestos Imports

Mr. Davidson: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what plans he has to ban the import of all forms of asbestos; if he has received the Health and Safety Commission's recommendation on this matter; and if he will make a statement. [85473]

Mr. Meacher: The policy on asbestos is decided and is final. The import of blue and brown asbestos is already banned. Earlier this month, a draft European Directive was voted on which would tighten the restrictions on imports of white asbestos. An overwhelming majority

voted in favour. I am pleased to say that the Health and Safety Commission, at its meeting yesterday, approved draft Regulations to implement a ban, and I look forward to receiving its advice.

Unfortunately, there are legal problems in formally making the Regulations before the European Commission ratifies the vote of the technical committee. The Government are now lobbying the European Commission to adopt the directive as a matter of urgency.

Memorials

Mr. David Atkinson: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will make a statement on his Department's discussions with the Confederation of Burial Authorities on the sale of memorials to the public. [85526]

Mr. Meale: My Department is currently preparing a paper for discussion with the Confederation of Burial Authorities, the National Association of Memorial Masons, and other representative bodies, both public and private sector, on the existing legal basis under which local authorities charge for the provision of memorials, and the Confederation's proposals for clarifying this.

Council Housing

Mr. Cox: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will make a statement on his policy on the building of new council housing in England and Wales. [85519]

Mr. Raynsford: The Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions is responsible for housing policy in England. His statement on "Housing and Regeneration Policy" on 22 July 1998 set out our policy. The need for new social housing in a local authority's area is a matter for that local authority to establish in its local housing strategy, as part of the Housing Investment Programme process. Most new social housing is provided by Registered Social Landlords supported by the Housing Corporation, either through its Approved Development Programme or through Local Authority Social Housing Grant, in areas where such developments are seen as a priority in local housing strategies.

Freight Transport

Mr. Cox: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what estimate he has made of the tonnage of freight which has transferred from road to rail in each of the last three years; and if he will make a statement. [85520]

Mrs. Liddell: My Department has not made estimates of this type. However, the Department does provide freight grants to companies to assist with the capital costs and track access charges associated with transferring freight from road to rail and inland waterway. Since May 1997, the Department's Freight Grants Unit has awarded grants to assist in the transfer of an estimated 15,918,610 tonnes of freight.

Asbestos

Mr. Cox: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what surveys his Department has commissioned on the amount of asbestos which is present in buildings which are still in use; and if he will make a statement. [85518]

Mr. Raynsford: No such surveys have been commissioned by the Department in the last 10 years.

At the request of the Department, the Medical Research Council, Institute for Environment and Health, carried out a review of the sources and uses of asbestos in buildings, the levels of exposure in the non-workplace environment and the health effects of such exposures. The report of this work entitled "Fibrous materials in the environment" was published by the Institute on 18 November 1997. A copy is in the Library.

Local Authority Properties

Mr. Cox: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what estimate he has made of the number of local authority properties which are regarded as unfit for human habitation. [85517]

Mr. Raynsford: Local authorities are asked to provide information on all dwellings in their area which are unfit (i.e. because they fail to meet the fitness criteria in Section 83 of Schedule 9 of the Local Government and Housing Act 1989) in their annual Housing Investment Programme returns. Separate figures are requested for local authority, registered social landlord, other public sector and private sector dwellings. The figures provided are local authorities' own estimates and are not necessarily compiled on a consistent basis.

The latest available figures are for 1 April 1998 and are given in the 1998 "HIP OI All Items Print", a copy of which is in the Library. The print includes county totals where estimates have been provided by all the authorities in the county.

Belmont Stables, Mill Hill

Mr. Dismore: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will make a statement on the progress of the planning appeal in relation to Belmont Stables, Mill Hill. [85619]

Mr. Caborn: The Inspector will submit his report to the Planning Inspectorate very shortly.

RAF East Camp Site, Colindale

Mr. Dismore: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will make a statement on the progress in respect of the planning decision in relation to the RAF East Camp Site, Colindale. [85618]

Mr. Caborn: We will issue a decision in due course.

Civil Aviation

Mr. Jenkin: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what representations he has received from UK airlines concerning the future of US/UK civil aviation agreements. [85479]

Ms Glenda Jackson: We are in frequent communication with UK airlines, large and small.

Mr. Jenkin: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if it is the Government's policy to retain responsibility for bilateral negotiations with third countries on civil aviation agreements. [85480]

Ms Glenda Jackson: We would consider transferring bilateral responsibilities to a third party only if we judged that to be in the wider interests of UK aviation.

Mr. Jenkin: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what recent discussions his Department has held with their US counterparts concerning the future of US/UK civil aviation agreements; who was present at those meetings; what were the agenda and the conclusions; and if he will make a statement. [85478]

Ms Glenda Jackson: At a meeting in Washington on 20 April, the Deputy Prime Minister and US Transportation Secretary Slater agreed that informal talks between UK and US officials about air services arrangements should take place in May. This was confirmed by my noble Friend Lord Whitty in the House of Lords on 28 April 1999, *Official Report, House of Lords*, columns 301–03, and the two teams of officials met on 18–20 May in London. The UK team comprised three DETR officials, two FCO officials and a representative from the Civil Aviation Authority; the US team comprised three State Department officials and three Department of Transportation officials. The discussions were broad and preliminary, with the emphasis on a phased approach to air services liberalisation.

Heathrow

Mr. Sheerman: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will make a statement on the reasons for the delay in the delivery of the recommendation from the Inspector on the Heathrow fifth terminal. [85513]

Mr. Caborn: The inquiry closed on 17 March 1999 and the Inspector told the inquiry that he expects to take up to two years to produce his report. Some 39 Applications and Orders are before the Inspector, who has taken evidence from over 750 witnesses with over 5,400 inquiry documents and 25,000 written representations. My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State will decide the application as soon as possible after receipt of the Inspector's report and recommendation.

Fuel Duty Rebate

Mr. Coaker: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what plans he has to extend fuel duty rebate to community transport schemes. [85613]

Ms Glenda Jackson: Possible changes to the scope of the bus fuel duty rebate scheme will be considered as part of the advice on all aspects of the public funding of bus services which we will be requesting from the new Commission for Integrated Transport when it begins its work next month. We will also be considering carefully all the recommendations of the review of voluntary and community transport commissioned by my Department, the report of which will be published shortly.

Minicabs (London)

Sir George Young: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions when he expects to issue the consultation paper on the proposed rules for London minicab operators in accordance with the implementation of the Private Hire Vehicles (London) Act 1998. [85669]

Ms Glenda Jackson: I have today with the Public Carriage Office issued the consultation paper. The Private Hire Vehicles (London) Act 1998 was an important step in bringing the safety of the travelling public in London in line with the rest of the country. The provisions of the Act were warmly welcomed by both the industry and consumer safety groups.

This consultation paper is the first step in implementing the Act and sets out proposals for the licensing of London minicab operators. It aims to strike a balance between the need to protect consumers and the interests of small business.

There will be an eight week period for responses and following assessment of responses we intend to undertake a short consultation before announcing the regulations for the licensing of London minicab operators.

Further consultation documents on the proposed rules for London minicab drivers and vehicles will be issued later this year and early next year respectively.

New Trains

Angela Smith: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if the fleet of 44 new trains to be introduced into service by LTS Rail Ltd. comply with the provisions of the Rail Vehicle Accessibility Regulations 1998; and if he will make a statement. [85727]

Ms Glenda Jackson: As I explained in my answer to my hon. Friend the Member for Harrow, East (Mr. McNulty) on 9 March 1999, *Official Report*, column *167*, we are expecting to receive a number of exemption applications from train operating companies whose designs for new rail vehicles were well advanced prior to the 1998 Regulations coming into force.

We have received such an application from LTS Rail Ltd. The exemptions, which have been discussed with our statutory advisors, the Disabled Persons Transport Advisory Committee, are mostly of a very minor nature and have been requested for a relatively short time only.

The exemptions will not prevent disabled people from using the new trains. Indeed, we believe that the introduction of the new class 357 trains will make a significant contribution to improving mobility opportunities for disabled people in the area.

An Order relating to the exemption of these rail vehicles has been laid in Parliament today.

Countryside Agency (Report)

Mr. Burgon: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions when he expects to publish the Government's response to the fourth report of session 1998–99 of the Environment, Transport and Regional Affairs Select Committee on the Countryside Agency (HC 6). [85728]

Mr. Meacher: I can inform the House that the Government's response was published today. It is available as Command Paper 4539.

Cleaner Vehicles

Mr. Colman: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions which cars and engines qualify for *(a)* the Energy Saving Trust Powershift Programme and *(b)* the dual-fuel option of that programme. [85475]

Ms Glenda Jackson: The Powershift Register published by the Energy Saving Trust provides details of all the alternatively fuelled vehicles and engine conversions, including dual-fuel options, that meet the minimum quality and safety standards laid down by the Trust. Powershift grants are available for those vehicles listed in the Register that offer significant emissions reductions compared with their petrol or diesel equivalent, with the highest grants going to those vehicles that offer the greatest emissions benefits.

Waste Management White Paper

Mr. Jenkin: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions when he plans to issue the proposed White Paper on waste management. [85483]

Mr. Meacher: I intend to publish a draft waste strategy shortly. We will consult fully with all interested parties before publishing a final version of the new waste strategy as a Command Paper at the end of the year.

Genetically Modified Organisms

Mr. Matthew Taylor: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions how many times officials from his Department have met officials from the US Government to discuss genetically modified organisms and the biotechnology industry since 1 June 1998; if he will list the dates and locations of each meeting; and with which US Government department his officials met. [80834]

Mr. Meacher: Ministers and officials in this department are in regular contact with representatives of all those with an interest in biotechnology—including environmental groups, consumer groups and biotechnology companies. We are also studying practice and trials in a number of countries overseas, including the United States. My officials have met with US Government officials on about a dozen occasions since June 1998, including at multinational meetings such as those held under the auspices of the OECD and UNEP. Information on dates and locations of meetings held at official level is not collected centrally.

Rail Freight Grants

Mr. Martlew: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions, pursuant to his oral answer of 13 April 1999, *Official Report*, column 10, if he will list the amount of money which his Department has paid in rail freight grants to Eddie Stobart Ltd, in each of the last five years. [81969]

Mrs. Liddell *[holding answer 23 April 1999]:* My right hon. Friend the Member for Hamilton, North and Bellshill (Dr. Reid) wrote to my hon. Friend as the then Minister for Transport. A copy of his letter has been placed in the Library.

Novel Crops

Mr. Baker: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what assessment he has made of the Canadian regulatory system for novel crops in respect of the environmental impact of such crops in his review of the regulatory process in the United Kingdom. [82070]

Mr. Meacher *[holding answer 27 April 1999]:* My officials are able to discuss the regulatory approach of other OECD countries through the OECD Expert Group on the Harmonisation of Regulatory Oversight in Biotechnology. The aim of this Group is to improve the harmonisation of regulatory approaches to the assessment of products in order to avoid trade barriers. The Government have asked the Advisory Committee on Releases to the Environment (ACRE) to consider the relative benefits of the process based and product based regulatory systems with respect to herbicide tolerant crops as set out in my answer of 24 May 1999, *Official Report*, columns *5–6*.

Capital Receipts Initiative

Mr. Martlew: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what is the total amount of capital receipts that have been released for Carlisle City Council in each year since 1990. [85041]

Ms Armstrong: In the three years 1997–98, 1998–99 and 1999–2000 capital allocations made through the Capital Receipts Initiative to Carlisle have been £0.373 million, £1.240 million and £1.226 million respectively. These allocations are made in the form of supplementary credit approvals and can be spent on housing and housing related regeneration projects which meet local priorities. The Capital Receipts Initiative was introduced during 1997–98.

NORTHERN IRELAND

Language Teaching

12. **Mr. Beggs:** To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland if she will make a statement on the funding of language teaching in Northern Ireland. [84450]

Mr. McFall: The Government consider it important to encourage the teaching of the major European languages in Northern Ireland and so language studies are one of the 6 areas of compulsory study within the Northern Ireland curriculum. All grant aided post-primary schools must offer pupils the opportunity to study one of French, German, Spanish or Latin, but funding for such provision is not identified separately. Schools may also offer Irish and pupils taking Irish thereby fulfil the requirements of the curriculum.

Peace Process

13. **Mr. Burden:** To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland what progress has been made in implementing the Good Friday agreement. [84451]

18. **Valerie Davey:** To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland if she will make a statement on developments in the Northern Ireland peace process. [84456]

19. **Mrs. Fyfe:** To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland what progress has been made in implementing the Belfast agreement. [84458]

21. **Mr. Simon Hughes:** To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland what assessment she has made of when the Northern Ireland Executive will be formed. [84460]

Marjorie Mowlam: I refer my hon. Friend to the reply I gave earlier to my hon. Friends the Members for Islwyn (Mr. Touhig), for Sheffield, Heeley (Mr. Michie), and for Aberdeen, South (Miss Beggs), and to the hon. Member for Ruislip-Northwood (Mr. Wilkinson).

Good Friday Agreement

14. **Mr. Pound:** To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland what steps are being taken to increase co-operation between Northern Ireland and the Irish Republic as set out in the Good Friday agreement. [84452]

15. **Mrs. Ellman:** To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland what steps are being taken to increase the co-operation between Northern Ireland and the Irish Republic as set out in the Good Friday agreement. [84453]

Marjorie Mowlam: Six new implementation bodies will work on an all-island basis on inland waterways, food safety, trade and business development, special EU programmes, language and aquaculture and marine matters. Six areas where enhanced co-operation will take place through existing bodies, north and south, have also been identified. These bodies are ready to function once powers are devolved to the Northern Ireland Assembly.

25. **Dr. Tony Wright:** To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland what assessment she has made of the role of an Irish-UK parliamentary body in implementing the Good Friday Agreement. [84464]

Mr. Paul Murphy: As the Good Friday Agreement is implemented, it will be important to build relationships between the UK and Irish Parliaments and the elected institutions of the devolved administrations. Strand Three of the Agreement states that

> "The elected institutions of the members (of the British-Irish Council) will be encouraged to develop interparliamentary links, perhaps building on the British-Irish Interparliamentary Body."

The Government welcome the positive contribution which the British-Irish Interparliamentary Body has made over recent years. Whilst we will encourage interparliamentary links to develop further, it will be a matter for the elected institutions themselves as to how they choose to proceed.

Decommissioning

16. **Mr. Campbell-Savours:** To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland what progress is being made on the decommissioning of weapons. [84454]

Mr. Ingram: I have welcomed the start to decommissioning made by the LVF on 18 December. The Decommissioning Commission continues its vital work. The Government also continue to meet with representatives of all the political parties to discuss all aspects of the Good Friday Agreement. We are determined that all aspects move forward in parallel.

Structural Funds

17. **Ms Moran:** To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland if she will make a statement on the impact of European structural funds on peace and reconciliation in Northern Ireland. [84455]

Mr. Paul Murphy: The European Union is funding the Special Support Programme for Peace and Reconciliation which aims to reinforce progress towards a peaceful and stable society and to promote reconciliation in Northern Ireland. Additional EU aid for the Programme for 1999 brings the total awarded to 400 million euros (approximately £285 million).

New Deal

20. **Kali Mountford:** To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland how many companies are signed up to the New Deal in Northern Ireland. [84459]

Mr. McFall: At the 23 April 1999, 2,646 Northern Ireland companies had confirmed their support for New Deal by signing an Employment Agreement.

Mr. Walker: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland what arrangements are in place to ensure that employers receiving subsidies under the New Deal are complying completely with the minimum wage legislation for all their employees, including those subsidised under the New Deal. [85120]

Mr. McFall: Responsibility for the subject in question has been delegated to the Training and Employment Agency under its chief executive, Mr. Ian Walters. I have asked him to arrange for a reply to be given.

Letter from Ian Walters to Mr. Cecil Walker, dated 25 May 1999:

The Secretary of State for Northern Ireland has asked me as Chief Executive of the Training & Employment Agency to reply to your question about the National Minimum Wage and, specifically, its implications for employees in jobs which attract a New Deal subsidy.

The role of implementing National Minimum Wage policy lies with the Department of Trade & Industry and the monitoring and enforcing functions have been assigned to the Inland Revenue. The Training & Employment Agency has no direct responsibility in these matters but the Agency's JobCentre staff are offering guidance based on DTI explanatory leaflets for both employers and employees. They are also signposting enquiries to the National Minimum Wage telephone information and enquiries lines. (Copies of the DTI leaflets are enclosed.) The Agency now requires all employers reporting vacancies, for which job applicants are sought, to confirm that at least National Minimum Wage rates will apply.

On the specific issue of New Deal employees' National Minimum Wage entitlements, Personal Advisers maintain a counselling and monitoring role during the subsidy period with employees and employers to ensure that all New Deal criteria and job recruitment agreements are being honoured.

I hope you find this reply useful.

Prison Officers (Redundancies)

22. **Mr. Geraint Davies:** To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland if she will make a statement on progress with redundancy arrangements for prison officers in Northern Ireland. [84461]

Mr. Ingram: 117 staff left the Prison Service on 30 March 1999 under the voluntary early retirement/early severance scheme. A further 93 staff are expected to leave by 30 June 1999. All those leaving under the scheme receive a comprehensive programme of support services.

Paramilitary Violence

23. **Mr. William Ross:** To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland what estimate she has made of the types and number of weapons in the possession of terrorist organisations which have been responsible for acts of violence in Northern Ireland. [84462]

Mr. Ingram: For obvious reasons, it is not our practice to disclose such intelligence matters. I can however say that substantial amounts of firearms, munitions and explosives are held by various groups in Northern Ireland.

Restorative Justice

24. **Mr. Michael Jabez Foster:** To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland what the objectives are of the new Government initiatives on restorative justice in Northern Ireland. [84463]

Mr. Ingram: I refer my hon. Friend to the reply I gave earlier to my hon. Friend the Member for Basildon (Angela Smith).

Drumcree

26. **Mr. Browne:** To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland what are the prospects for achieving a local accommodation over the disputed parade at Drumcree this year. [84465]

Mr. Ingram: I refer my hon. Friend to the reply I gave earlier to my hon. Friend the Member for Aberdeen, North (Mr. Savidge).

Child Protection

Mr. Cox: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland how many children in Northern Ireland who are registered with local authorities are registered on the Child Protection Register; and if he will make a statement. [85085]

Mr. McFall: There were 1,418 children in Northern Ireland on the Child Protection Register at 31 December 1998, the latest date for which such information is available.

Compensation Agency

Mrs. Fyfe: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland when the future plans for the Compensation Agency will be published; and if she will make a statement. [85867]

Mr. Ingram: The Compensation Agency will publish today its Corporate Plan and Business Plan. The Plans explain the Agency's business and organisation and set out the assumptions about work loads and resources which underpin the plans and targets.

INTERNATIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Farmers (Tibet)

Mr. Drew: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development (1) what representations she has made to the World Bank about its proposal to help fund the re-settlement of farmers from outside the region to Tibet; [85129]

(2) what representations she has made to China about the re-location of farmers from outside the region to Tibet. [85128]

Clare Short: I understand that these questions relate to the World Bank's proposed Western Poverty Reduction Project in Qinghai province of China (bordering the autonomous region of Tibet). We have requested further details of the proposal from World Bank staff in Washington. I will write to my hon. Friend when this information is available.

UNESCO

Mr. Gapes: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development what financial and other assistance her Department intends to provide to establish a UK National Commission for UNESCO. [84896]

Clare Short: We will provide a core grant not exceeding £70,000 a year towards the costs of a UK Commission for United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO). We and other Departments will also consider support for specific activities in accordance with Government priorities. It is expected that civil society groupings with an interest in UNESCO will provide additional funding for the Commission.

TREASURY

Media Relations

Mr. Baker: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer how many *(a)* civil servants and *(b)* special advisers involved in media relations were employed within his Department at 1 May (i) 1997, (ii) 1998 and (iii) 1999. [84191]

Ms Hewitt *[holding answer 18 May 1999]:* Detailed information on the number of permanent civil servants employed in Departmental Press Offices during the financial years 1997–98 and 1998–99 was provided in a memorandum to the Select Committee on Public Administration and published in its report on The Government Information and Communication Service (HC770) in July 1998. A copy is in the Library of the House. The numbers in post at 1 May 1999 are 7.

Special Advisers in this Department advise Treasury Ministers on the full range of policy issues.

Alcohol and Tobacco Smuggling

Mr. Maude: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if he will estimate the cost of not implementing the recommendations of the report of the Alcohol and Tobacco Fraud Review. [85101]

Dawn Primarolo: If the recommendations of the Alcohol and Tobacco Fraud Review had not been implemented and the allocation of £35 million over 3 years had not been made to Customs to effect these recommendations, Customs would be unable to achieve by 2001–02 the target set in the Government's Comprehensive Spending Review White Paper for detecting alcohol and tobacco fraud. There would also be an even greater threat of large-scale excise crime.

Special Advisers

Mr. Gibb: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer (1) in what capacity his then special adviser addressed the Chalk Farm Branch Labour Party meeting on 9 February; and if the Government's economic policy was discussed and questions on this subject answered; [84827]

(2) how many invitations to address meetings of Labour Party branches or constituency Labour parties his special advisers have *(a)* received, *(b)* accepted and *(c)* declined since May 1997; [84826]

(3) what criteria he applies when advising his special advisers on the acceptance of speaking engagements; [84829]

(4) how many speaking engagements have been undertaken by his special advisers since May 1997; [84825]

(5) if he discussed in advance the content of his special adviser's speech to the Chalk Farm Labour Party on 9 February. [84828]

Ms Hewitt: Any speaking engagements undertaken by Treasury Special Advisers have been fully in line with the terms of their contracts.

Disabled People (Contributions)

Mr. Field: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer how many disabled people and people with a long-term illness in work he expects to pay (i) no contributions and (ii) contributions of less than 25 times the lower earnings limit in each of the next five years; and if he will give this figure as a proportion of the total number of this group in work. [85510]

Dawn Primarolo: The only information available is based on the Family Resources Survey for 1997–98, covering Great Britain, and shows that about 550,000 people with a long-term illness, disability, or infirmity were working but not paying national insurance contributions. This represents about 12 per cent. of the total number of this group in work.

Working Families Tax Credit

Jackie Ballard: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what estimate he has made of the increase in demand for childcare places as a result of the introduction of the childcare tax credit within the working families tax credit. [84958]

Dawn Primarolo: The Government have commissioned work into the demand for childcare places within the context of the National Childcare Strategy. Results from this analysis are due to be published later in the year, and follow-up work is envisaged in 2001 which should help inform our understanding of existing and future demand for childcare.

Jackie Ballard: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what estimate he has made of the impact on parents' ability to pay higher childcare fees of the introduction of the childcare tax credit element of the working families tax credit. [84957]

Dawn Primarolo: The ability of parents to pay childcare fees at the prevailing rates following the introduction of the childcare tax credit will depend on a range of factors. It is not practicable for the Government to estimate reliably whether, or to what extent, the introduction of the childcare tax credit component of the Working Families Tax Credit will have an effect on childcare charges.

Jackie Ballard: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer how the Inland Revenue will take account of differences in the cost of childcare during holiday periods, compared to term time, when calculating the childcare element of the working families tax credit. [84960]

Dawn Primarolo: The calculation of the childcare element within the Working Families Tax Credit will take account of differences in the cost of childcare in holiday periods, compared to term time, in the same way that Family Credit takes account of these variations currently.

Jackie Ballard: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what evidence parents will be required to produce to support a claim for the childcare tax credit element of the working families tax credit. [84955]

Dawn Primarolo: Parents will be required to obtain confirmation of their costs, or expected childcare costs, from their childcare provider in the same way that they would currently for Family Credit.

Jackie Ballard: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what information childcare providers will have to provide to the Inland Revenue to show how much those parents claiming working families tax credit are charged for childcare. [84959]

Dawn Primarolo: Childcare providers will be asked to verify parents actual or expected childcare costs for WFTC using a form similar to the one they are currently asked to complete for Family Credit.

Ms Harman: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer how the working families tax credit will be assessed when the snapshot of income immediately preceding an application comes out at a time when the applicant is on parental leave without pay. [84751]

Dawn Primarolo *[holding answer 20 May 1999]:* The rules for the assessment of WFTC where one or both parents are on unpaid parental leave will be the same as those used currently for Family Credit where the parent, or parents, are on any other sorts of unpaid leave. The exact treatment will depend entirely on the individual circumstances of the family.

Jackie Ballard: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer which social security benefits will be excluded from the calculation for entitlement to working families tax credit. [84950]

Dawn Primarolo: The same social security benefits will be excluded from the calculation for entitlement of WFTC as are currently excluded from the calculation of entitlement to Family Credit. These are Child Benefit, Child Benefit (Lone Parent), Guardian's Allowance,

Maternity Allowance, Housing Benefit, Council Tax Benefit, Personal Council Tax Transitional Relief or Reduction, Attendance Allowance, Disability Living Allowance, £10 Christmas Bonus, Constant Attendance Allowance, war pensioner's mobility supplement, supplementary pensions for war widows, Exceptionally Severe Disablement Allowance, any Social Fund payment, Severe Disablement Occupational Allowance, Income Support, income-based Jobseeker's Allowance. And in addition, the first £10 of the total income is disregarded (up to a maximum disregard of £20) where it comes from War Widow's or Widower's Pension, War Disablement Pensions, or equivalent payments made by foreign social security schemes.

Tax Law Rewrite Project

Ms Lawrence: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if there have been further developments on the Tax Law Rewrite project. [85668]

Dawn Primarolo: I am pleased to be able to tell the House about yet another publication from the Tax Law Rewrite project. The Inland Revenue will shortly publish the project's sixth Exposure Draft, which contains draft clauses on employment income. Copies will be placed in the Libraries of the House.

This Exposure Draft is the third to be published in the last three months. The work of the project is gathering pace and we can look forward to further publications later in the year.

Air Passenger Duty

Mr. Pendry: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer when the Government were first informed of the European Commission's intention to pursue infraction proceedings against the application in the United Kingdom of the domestic flight return-leg exemption from air passenger duty. [82638]

Mrs. Roche: The European Commission issued a Reasoned Opinion on 23 June 1998 in this matter.

Mr. Pendry: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer when he expects to make an announcement on the Government's response to the European Commission's infraction proceedings against the application in the United Kingdom of the domestic return-leg exemption from air passenger duty; and if he will make a statement. [82637]

Mrs. Roche: We are still considering how to respond to the European Commission's challenge to the domestic return-leg exemption.

Mr. Pendry: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what supplementary revenue will be obtained from air passenger duty if the current domestic flight return-leg exemption from this duty were to be abolished. [82645]

Mrs. Roche: At current passenger numbers, and assuming no behavioural effects, it is estimated that the additional revenue from abolishing the domestic return-leg exemption would be in the order of £60 million.

Mr. Pendry: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what representations he has received about the impact on accessibility to low-cost domestic air travel if the current domestic return-leg air passenger duty exemption were to be abolished. [82643]

Mrs. Roche: I have not received any representation on this particular issue.

Mr. Pendry: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what estimate he has made of the rate of air passenger duty which would have to be levied on flights within the EU, should air passenger duty be applied to both legs of domestic return flights in the UK, to ensure the income to the Treasury from air passenger duty remains as forecast in the document Budget 99. [82644]

Mrs. Roche: The precise figure will depend on the proportion of domestic flights within the UK which contain a return leg. Depending on the proportion of return journeys, a rate of between £8 and £9 would be consistent with broad revenue neutrality if Air Passenger Duty were applied to both legs of domestic return flights. This estimate assumes current passenger numbers and no behavioural effects.

Small High-tech Businesses

Mr. Cotter: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what response he has received to the consultation document, Financial Promotion; and what steps he is considering to help eliminate the equity gap in respect of the funding of smaller high-technology new businesses. [85656]

Ms Hewitt: The consultation paper includes consideration of ways to facilitate informal capital raising to assist small and medium-sized firms, including those in the high-technology sector, gain access to investment funding. A number of responses have been received and are being considered.

Disabled Persons Tax Credit

Mr. Field: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if he will estimate the proportion of those he expects to claim the disabled persons tax credit who will be paying *(a)* no national insurance contributions and *(b)* contributions of less than 25 times the lower earnings limit in each of the next five years. [85509]

Dawn Primarolo: It is estimated that about 25 per cent. of DPTC recipients will pay no national insurance contributions in 1999–2000. The percentage actually paying no contributions in subsequent years will be higher, because of the increase in the thresholds announced in the Budget. However, contributions on earnings between the lower earnings limit and the new threshold will be notionally paid with no loss of benefit entitlement. The proportion earning less than the lower earnings limit is expected to remain at about 25 per cent.

I regret that no information is available on the proportion of DPTC claimants paying contributions on earnings of less than 25 times the lower earnings limit in a year.

Independent Adjudicator for the Inland Revenue

Mr. Barnes: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer when the position of Independent Adjudicator for the Inland Revenue was established; how this position is advertised and appointed; how many complaints in each year since its establishment have been referred to the Independent Adjudicator for the Inland Revenue; how many were *(a)* upheld and *(b)* dismissed; and what

representations he has received concerning parliamentary scrutiny of the appointment of the Independent Adjudicator for the Inland Revenue. [85350]

Dawn Primarolo: The Office of the Revenue Adjudicator was established in May 1993 to introduce an element of impartiality into the Revenue's complaints system.

The post is advertised in the national press and appointment made through open competition.

The Adjudicator's Office received 14,322 complaints in the six year period to 31 March 1999. Of these, 11,644 were resolved without the need for full investigation.

Of the 2,434 complaints investigated, 1,106 were upheld, 1,194 not upheld and 134 withdrawn.

Bates Report (PFI)

Mr. Hopkins: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer (1) when he will publish the Bates report on the private finance initiative; and if he will make a statement; [84993]

(2) if he will publish the second Bates report on the private finance initiative. [84994]

Mr. Milburn: I refer my hon. Friend to the answer I gave to the hon. Member for Bognor Regis and Littlehampton (Mr. Gibb) on 27 April 1999, *Official Report*, column *122*.

Inflation Target

Mr. Jack: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer for what reasons 2½ per cent. remains his inflation target; and if he will make a statement. [85349]

Ms Hewitt: The Government's inflation target is 2½ per cent., defined by the 12-month increase in the RPI excluding mortgage interest payments (RPIX). Low inflation is an essential precondition for achieving the Government's objectives of high and sustainable levels of growth and employment.

Mr. Jack: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what changes to current economic policy would be required to achieve a 2 per cent. inflation target by the end of 2000. [85348]

Mr. Maude: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what plans he has to introduce legislation to change the measure of inflation used by the Bank of England to define progress towards achieving the Government's target rate of inflation; and if he will make a statement. [85384]

Ms Hewitt: In his last Budget on 9 March 1999, the Chancellor confirmed the Government's inflation target is 2½ per cent. defined by the 12-month increase in the RPI excluding mortgage interest payments (RPIX). This target was reaffirmed in a recent letter from the Chancellor to the Governor of the Bank of England, setting out the remit for the Monetary Policy Committee. A copy of this letter has been placed in the House of Commons Library.

Harmonised Index of Consumer Prices

Mr. Maude: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer (1) what consultations he has had with the Governor of the Bank of England with regard to the Harmonised Index of Consumer Prices; [85385]

(2) what consultations *(a)* Treasury Ministers and *(b)* Treasury officials have had with officials of the Bank of England with regard to the use of the Harmonised Index of Consumer Prices as a measure of inflation in the past 12 months. [85386]

Ms Hewitt: The Chancellor and Treasury officials meet regularly with Bank of England officials to exchange views on a wide variety of issues.

Mr. Maude: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if he will make a statement on the current and future use of the Harmonised Index of Consumer Prices as a measure of inflation in the United Kingdom. [85387]

Ms Hewitt: The Government's inflation target is 2½ per cent. defined by the 12-month increase in the RPI excluding mortgage interest payments (RPIX). This target was reaffirmed in a recent letter from the Chancellor to the Governor of the Bank of England, setting out the remit for the Monetary Policy Committee. A copy of this letter has been placed in the House of Commons Library.

Secondary Markets

Mr. Hawkins: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what is the Government's policy on the functionality of secondary markets in financial services; and what plans he has to ensure that consumers are made aware of the existence of secondary markets in financial services. [85124]

Ms Hewitt *[holding answer 24 May 1999]:* The Government aim to ensure that all parts of the financial services markets operate as efficiently and fairly as possible. The Financial Services and Markets Bill will give the Financial Services Authority a statutory objective of consumer protection and public awareness.

CULTURE, MEDIA AND SPORT

Dry Rooms

Mr. Sanders: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport if he will make it his policy to de-regulate dry rooms in bed and breakfast and hotel accommodation. [85115]

Janet Anderson: The Government's new tourism strategy aims to create a regulatory framework in which tourism-related businesses, including accommodation businesses, can prosper. My Department is working with other Departments to review regulatory burdens on the tourism industry, with a view to removing those which are unnecessary. I understand that the Home Office will be looking at the question of dry rooms as part of its general review of liquor licensing law.

Britain Visitor Centre

Mr. Peter Ainsworth: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport what are the funding arrangements for the Britain Visitor Centre; and what will be its annual running costs. [85299]

Mr. Chris Smith *[holding answer 24 May 1999]:* The Britain Visitor Centre is funded by the British Tourist Authority, partly through rental payments by sub-tenants and partly from grant-in-aid. The annual running costs for

1999–2000 are expected to be £975,000, of which £625,000 is covered by rental payments and £350,000 by grant-in-aid.

Comprehensive Spending Review

Mr. McNulty: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport if he will publish the funding agreements which his Department has concluded with its sponsored bodies following his Department's Comprehensive Spending Review. [85819]

Mr. Alan Howarth: I have today placed in the Libraries of the House copies of 33 agreements that the Department has concluded with its Non-Departmental Public Bodies and Next Steps Agency.

SOCIAL SECURITY

Winter Fuel Allowance

Mr. Paul Marsden: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security if he will estimate how many pensioner households in Shrewsbury and Atcham will receive the £100 winter fuel allowance. [84865]

Mr. Timms: From an examination of the number of eligible pensioners identified in the post code areas for Shrewsbury and Atcham for the winter of 1998–99 we estimate that around 57,000 individual pensioners in over 42,000 households will benefit from Winter Fuel Payments next winter.

Fraud

Mr. Field: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security if he will estimate what the fraud savings from the automation of benefit payments at post offices would have been had the project been completed on schedule. [85229]

Mr. Timms: Fraudulent payments associated with paying benefits through giro cheques and order books were estimated to stand at around £180 million per annum when the project was initiated in 1996. The payment card, when fully in place, was estimated to cut out 90 per cent. of such fraudulent payments.

EDUCATION AND EMPLOYMENT

School Funding (Cambridgeshire)

Mrs. Anne Campbell: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what the additional amount of money is which Cambridgeshire County Council would have delegated to schools in 1998–99, if the proportion delegated had been at the level of the local education authority which delegated the highest proportion. [85357]

Mr. Charles Clarke: The highest proportion of the Potential Schools Budget delegated by a local education authority in 1998–99 was 95.8 per cent. If Cambridgeshire had delegated at this level, the additional amount of the Aggregated Schools Budget available to its schools would have been £11 million.

Disability Discrimination Act 1995

Mr. Jim Cunningham: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what assessment he has made of the impact on business costs of the implementation of the Disability Discrimination Act 1995. [85152]

Ms Hodge: The Government's estimates of the costs and benefits of introducing the later rights in Part III of the Disability Discrimination Act 1995 and of introducing the first part of the duty of reasonable adjustment on trade organisations under Part II of the Act, are contained in separate Regulatory Impact Assessments. Copies are available in the Library. They can also be found on the disability website—www.disability.gov.uk.

Disability Rights Commission

Mr. Jim Cunningham: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what measures he will take to ensure that the Disability Rights Commissioner provides technical support to employers and service providers in Coventry. [85153]

Ms Hodge: The Disability Rights Commission Bill is currently before Parliament. The commission, when established, will be an independent statutory body which will prepare and review statutory codes of practice and make arrangements for conciliation in the field of access to goods, facilities, services and premises. It will also provide a central source of information and advice to employers, service providers and disabled people.

It will be for the Commission to determine how best to provide its services to all its stakeholders when it is established and to report on its activities through its annual report to Parliament.

Mr. Jim Cunningham: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what representations he has received regarding the introduction of the Disability Rights Commission and its impact on business competitiveness. [85151]

Ms Hodge: A public consultation on the Government White Paper, "Promoting Disabled People's Rights—Creating a Disability Rights Commission fit for the 21st Century", was held last year.

7,000 individuals and organisations were sent a copy of the White Paper or a summary of it. Out of 626 responses (of which 12 per cent. were identified as coming from businesses or organisations representing business interests) 94 per cent. supported the main proposals on the establishment and role of the Commission. An analysis of responses compiled by an independent market research organisation will be placed in the Library in the near future.

Five national consultation conferences on the White Paper held in September and October 1998 were attended by over 300 delegates from the business, public and voluntary sectors. The views of the delegates are also reflected in the report.

Disability Leave Agreements

Mr. Jim Cunningham: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what representations he has received concerning disability leave agreements. [85154]

Ms Hodge: We have had no specific representations about disability leave agreements, but the idea of disability leave has been discussed recently by the Disability Rights Task Force and the Advisory Committee on Disabled People in Employment and Training (ACDET) Group looking at job retention. Voluntary disability leave agreements between employers and employees can help people with disabilities play a full part in working life.

Class Sizes

Mr. Bob Russell: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment if he will list for schools in Essex Education Authority the change in the average size of classes taught by one teacher between January 1998 and January 1999 for pupils in *(a)* nursery classes, *(b)* Key Stage Two and *(c)* secondary schools. [84580]

Mr. Charles Clarke: The Government have pledged to reduce infant class sizes to 30 or below by September 2001 at the latest, and we are on target to meet that pledge.

The available information for Essex Local Authority is shown in the table.

Essex local education authority area
January each year
Average class size of one teacher classes

	1998	*1999*
Nursery classes	25.0	24.7
Key stage one	26.6	26.5
Key stage two	28.6	28.7
Overall primary	27.6	27.7
Secondary	21.7	21.6

IT (Inner-city Schools)

Mr. Cox: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what steps his Department is taking to develop the use of IT in schools in inner city areas. [85332]

Mr. Charles Clarke: Under Excellence in Cities we shall be developing Learning Centres in inner city areas. The first 30 will be up and running in the Excellence in Cities target areas by September 2000, with more to follow after that. This was announced as part of a major programme focused on the inner cities, and supplements the very substantial support already available through the National Grid for Learning and the New Opportunities Fund.

Further Education Funding Council

Mr. Green: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what guidance he has given the Further Education Funding Council on the future of franchising activity by colleges; and if he will make a statement. [85466]

Mr. Mudie: My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State authorised the following advice to the FEFC in December 1998—that (i) FEFC funding should not be transferred from colleges to employers other than exceptionally for the lease of equipment and premises; (ii) franchised arrangements should not operate well outside the college's area—and where a college did extend its operations in this way then it should do so after consultation with the local college or colleges concerned; and (iii) the FEFC should consult the DfEE about the implications for funding policy of its study of the costs of franchised provision.

In response, the FEFC has: required that colleges do not transfer funding to employers other than exceptionally; established a local priorities working group to advise on policy for off site delivery; and reduced the funding available for the majority of franchised activity.

Jobseekers

Mr. Willetts: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment if parents signing on for jobseeker's allowance are entitled to be accompanied by their children at a jobcentre interview. [85092]

Mr. Andrew Smith: Responsibility for the subject of this question has been delegated to the Employment Service Agency under its Chief Executive. I have asked him to arrange for a reply to be given.

Letter from Leigh Lewis to Mr. David Willetts, dated 26 May 1999:

As the Employment Service is an Executive Agency, the Secretary of State for Education and Employment has asked me to reply direct to your question about the presence of children accompanying their parents at Jobcentre interviews. This is something which falls within the responsibilities delegated to me as Chief Executive of the Agency.

We appreciate that many people looking for work have dependent children and that it is sometimes convenient for them to bring a child with them when attending interviews at the Jobcentre. In accordance with our general policy that Jobcentres should present a welcoming environment to all jobseekers, we are happy for this to be the case. Where the presence of children makes it difficult to undertake the interview effectively we will discuss re-arranging the interview for a time when alternative care arrangements can be made.

I hope this is helpful.

School Closures

Mrs. Anne Campbell: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment if he will list the decisions which have come before him since May 1997 on school closure; and the outcome of each of those decisions. [85356]

Mr. Charles Clarke: A list of the school closure proposals decided by my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State since May 1997 is shown in a table, copies of which have been placed in the Library.

Mr. Tom Engel

Mr. Willetts: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment (1) what guidance he received from the Cabinet Office relating to the procedures for the appointment of his new special adviser, Mr. Tom Engel; [85545]

(2) what will be the responsibilities of his new special adviser, Mr. Tom Engel; [85542]

(3) if he will list those areas on which his special adviser, Mr. Tom Engel, will not receive papers or give advice, so as to avoid conflicts of interest, as specified in the model contract for special advisers. [85544]

Mr. Blunkett: Tom Engel will start work as Special Adviser to me on 1 June. He will be employed under terms and conditions set out in the model contract for Special Advisers. He was appointed following a competitive interview process and his appointment is fully in line with Cabinet Office procedures, including having been authorised by the Prime Minister.

Tom Engel will be required to sever all links with his previous employer, Westminster Strategy, and his policy responsibilities in the Department will have no relevance to the responsibilities he held at Westminster Strategy. He will work to me across the range of subjects for which the Department has responsibility.

SCOTLAND

Regional Selective Assistance

Mr. Alasdair Morgan: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland how many jobs have been created as a result of the additional grants available in the regional selection assistance priority pilot areas; and what proportion of the budget allocated for this purpose remains unspent. [84868]

Dr. Reid: Since the Regional Selective Assistance (RSA) Priority initiative was launched on a pilot basis on 22 May 1998, 14 projects have been offered grant assistance of £1.9 million. This will lead to the planned creation of an additional 99 jobs for the residents of the 5 particularly deprived areas chosen for the pilot phase.

Funds are available from within the overall RSA budget and are not specifically allocated for this initiative.

From 1 July 1999, this will be a matter for the Scottish Parliament.

HIV/AIDS

Dr. Strang: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland if he will list the cumulative numbers of people with AIDS who died in *(a)* Scotland and *(b)* each health board area of Scotland in each year from 1981 to 1988, in 1998 and in 1999 to date. [84820]

Mr. Macdonald: The information is set out in the following table:

Cumulative AIDS deaths as at 31 December of selected years by health board of AIDS registration, and for Scotland, as at 31 March 1999

Health Board	*1981*	*1982*	*1983*	*1984*	*1985*	*1986*	*1988*	*1998*	*1999*
Argyll and Clyde	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	4	4
Ayrshire and Arran	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	9	9
Borders	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	1
Dumfries and Galloway	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	3	3
Fife	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	12	12
Forth Valley	0	0	0	0	1	1	1	4	4
Grampian	0	0	0	0	0	0	3	30	30
Greater Glasgow	0	1	1	2	2	8	19	180	180
Highland	0	0	0	0	0	1	1	5	5
Lanarkshire	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	10	10
Lothian	0	0	0	0	0	2	14	335	335
Orkney	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Shetland	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Tayside	0	0	0	0	0	1	2	128	130
Western Isles	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Scotland	0	1	1	2	3	13	42	721	723

Source:
The Scottish Centre for Infection and Environmental Health AIDS/HIV Register

From 1 July 1999, this will be a matter for the Scottish Parliament.

Erskine Bridge

Dr. Godman: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland what was the final cost of the repairs and ancillary work to the Erskine Bridge following the accident involving an off-shore installation under towage; if these costs were recovered from the parties deemed responsible; and if he will make a statement. [84678]

Mr. Macdonald *[holding answer 25 May 1999]:* The final cost of the repairs and ancillary work to the Erskine Bridge is £4.25 million. The Scottish Office is committed to recovering these costs and has intimated its claim to those considered to be responsible. This claim will continue to be pursued.

From 1 July 1999, this will be a matter for the Scottish Parliament.

PRIME MINISTER

Media Relations

Mr. Baker: To ask the Prime Minister how many *(a)* civil servants and *(b)* special advisers involved in media relations were employed within his Department at 1 May (i) 1997, (ii) 1998 and (iii) 1999. [84199]

The Prime Minister *[holding answer 18 May 1999]:* Detailed information on the number of civil servants employed in Departmental Press Offices during the financial years 1997–98 and 1998–99 was provided in a memorandum to the Select Committee on Public Administration and published in its report on "The Government Information and Communication Service" (HC 770) in July 1998. A copy is in the Library of the House.

Media relations are handled by the Downing Street Press Office which consists of 8 press officers, 3 of whom are special advisers. They work under the direction of my

Official Spokesman and are the only people authorised to have direct contact with the media on my behalf other than on occasions where others may be specifically directed by my Official Spokesman.

The Strategic Communications Unit was set up on 14 January 1998. Speaking on behalf of the Government is not part of the SCU's function but the civil servants and special advisers there obviously speak to the press from time to time.

Kosovo

Mr. Robathan: To ask the Prime Minister if he will list the *(a)* opinion polling and *(b)* focus group research carried out on the authority of the Government into the use of military force in connection with the Kosovo conflict. [85046]

The Prime Minister: None.

Concordats

Dr. Fox: To ask the Prime Minister what progress has been made in drawing up concordats between UK departments, the National Assembly for Wales and the Scottish Executive. [85435]

The Prime Minister: Work has been done within the UK Government to prepare a set of draft concordats to provide a framework of guidance on relationships to ensure smooth conduct of business with the new devolved Administrations. I expect these drafts to be passed to the devolved Administrations for their consideration in due course.

Macedonia

Mr. Worthington: To ask the Prime Minister if he will make a statement about progress made in providing assistance to Macedonia and Albania as an outcome of the donors' meeting held in Paris on 5 May. [84789]

The Prime Minister *[holding answer 24 May 1999]:* At the Donors' Conference for Macedonia on 5 May, the international community, including international financial institutions, pledged $252 million in financial assistance to Macedonia. The EU has pledged 25 million euro in refugee related budgetary assistance, 10 million euro in humanitarian support and 22 million euro in developmental assistance. Details are in the EU and World Bank Chairmen's Conclusions of the Donors Conference, which will be deposited in the Library of the House. The Albanian Donors' Conference is to be held today.

Poet Laureate

Mr. Peter Ainsworth: To ask the Prime Minister (1) if he will set out the established procedures for announcing the appointment of the Poet Laureate; and if he will make a statement; [85446]

(2) what procedures he has put in place to establish who informed *The Times* newspaper of the identity of the next Poet Laureate. [85447]

The Prime Minister *[holding answer 25 May 1999]:* Downing Street had planned to announce the name of the new Poet Laureate today, Wednesday 26 May. In view of the story appearing in *The Times* on Wednesday 19 May this announcement was brought forward by a week. In accordance with normal procedures, with the agreement of Buckingham Palace, Downing Street announces this appointment by way of a Press Notice. *The Times* has made it clear that the leak did not come from Downing Street.

NATO (Media Relations Advisers)

Mr. Keith Simpson: To ask the Prime Minister which Government officials and special advisers are advising NATO headquarters on presentational and media relations. [85380]

The Prime Minister *[holding answer 25 May 1999]:* Last month the NATO Secretary General and SACEUR asked my Chief Press Secretary to visit NATO and advise on media relations. Since then he and a number of other Government officials have been helping NATO and SHAPE deal with the enormous media demand. They are working with NATO staff and officials from several other NATO countries.

Effective communications are important, particularly when Milosevic has a state run media and no cameras are allowed to film the atrocities being carried out in Kosovo.

Engagements

Sir Peter Tapsell: To ask the Prime Minister if he will list his official engagements for Wednesday 26 May. [85080]

The Prime Minister: This morning, I had meetings with ministerial colleagues and others. In addition to my duties in the House, I shall have further such meetings later today.

I will also be attending the celebrations to mark the opening of the Welsh Assembly.

Mr. Tom Engel

Mr. Willetts: To ask the Prime Minister if the appointment of Mr. Tom Engel as a special adviser to the Secretary of State for Education and Employment was approved by the Prime Minister. [85543]

The Prime Minister: Yes.

European Trade Policy

Mr. Corbett: To ask the Prime Minister what arrangements he has made for Ministerial consideration of European trade policy issues. [85730]

The Prime Minister: I have established a new Committee to discuss these issues. The Sub-Committee on European Trade Issues (E)DOP(T), under the Chairmanship of my right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary, will report to the Ministerial Sub-Committee on European Issues ((E)DOP), which also meets under the Foreign Secretary's Chairmanship. The composition and Terms of Reference of this new Committee are as follows:

Ministerial Sub-Committee on European Trade Issues ((E)DOP(T))

Composition:

Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs (Chairman)

Chancellor of the Exchequer

Secretary of State for International Development

Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food

Secretary of State for Trade and Industry.

Other Ministers will be invited to attend as the nature of the business requires.

The United Kingdom's Permanent Representative to the European Union is also in attendance.

Terms of Reference

"To consider questions relating to European Union trade policy issues and to report as necessary to the Ministerial Sub-Committee on European issues."

AGRICULTURE, FISHERIES AND FOOD

Flood and Coastal Defence

Mr. McNulty: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what progress has been made on the review of the funding arrangements for flood and coastal defence and development of high level targets for flood and coastal defence operating authorities. [85731]

Mr. Morley: In response to last year's Agriculture Select Committee Report on Flood and Coastal Defence, the Government agreed to review the funding mechanisms for flood and coastal defence. As a first step in the review process, a consultation letter was issued to interested parties on 7 May. A copy has been placed in the Libraries.

A consultation paper seeking comments on substantive high level targets for flood and coastal defence from March 2000 will be issued to a wide range of interested organisations later this week; a copy will be placed in the Libraries. The Environment Agency will be consulting separately on further elaboration of its flood defence supervisory duty, and reporting to me in the autumn.

TRADE AND INDUSTRY

Encryption (Law Enforcement)

Mr. McNulty: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry if he will make a statement on the results of the study recently carried out on Encryption and Law Enforcement by the Performance and Innovation Unit in the Cabinet Office. [85605]

Mr. Wills: I am now able to announce the main conclusions from this important study carried out by a joint Government-industry team in the Cabinet Office's Performance and Innovation Unit.

The Team's recommendations, which have been agreed by the Government, include the establishment of a new industry/Government forum to take forward discussion on encryption matters which will be chaired by a senior DTI official; a new initiative to create an international forum to discuss encryption and law enforcement issues; and the establishment of a Technical Assistance Centre (under Home Office auspices) to assist the law enforcement agencies to make intelligible legally obtained encrypted information.

On the Electronic Commerce Bill, the PIU Team concluded that the proposed licensing (or accreditation) regime for cryptography service providers should not include any requirement for mandatory storage of encryption keys. The PIU team also welcomed the proposals in the consultation document to allow lawful access to decryption keys and/or plain text under proper authority

I believe that the recommendations outlined above, coupled with the dialogue that has already taken place with industry on this complex issue, will usher in a new era of co-operation between Government and industry; ensuring that the UK becomes both the best, and the safest, place to conduct electronic business.

Copies of the PIU report are available in the Libraries of the House.

Raw Milk

Mr. Garnier: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry when he proposes to respond to the Monopolies and Mergers Commission report on the selling of raw milk; and if he will make a statement. [85533]

Dr. Howells: I refer the hon. and learned Member to my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry's oral answer on 6 May 1999, *Official Report*, column 1069, to the hon. Member for Somerton and Frome (Mr. Heath).

Mr. Michael J. Foster: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry, pursuant to his answer of 28 April 1999, *Official Report*, column *194*, on raw cows' milk, if he will list the hon. Members who wrote to him in April regarding the Monopoly and Mergers inquiry. [85360]

Dr. Howells: I am placing in the Library of the House a list of the hon. Members who wrote to my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry in April regarding the Monopolies and Mergers Commission's report on the supply in Great Britain of raw cows' milk.

Single Vehicle Car Imports

Mr. Boswell: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what arrangements he will make to ensure that single vehicle car imports are compliant with EU safety requirements. [85611]

Mr. Battle: Single vehicle imports are subject to the Single Vehicle Approval test administered by my right hon. Friend the Minister for Transport. Its purpose is to ensure that imported cars which are not manufactured in the European Union are safe on UK roads. To that end, the proposed revisions to the scheme will enhance the test standards to align broadly with EU safety standards.

Mr. Boswell: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what arrangements he will make to ensure that consumers are kept informed of specification differences between UK-sourced new cars and single vehicle imports. [85612]

Mr. Battle: The Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions has published a booklet "The Single Vehicle Approval scheme" (SVA2) which describes the existing SVA regulations and test regime. Before the proposed revisions to the scheme are implemented, they will update and expand this information to include the main differences between European and non-European standards. The existence of specification differences between cars made for use in the European Union and sold

through the manufacturers' official networks, and those made for other markets and brought into the UK by independent importers, has also been the subject of extensive coverage in the media. In deciding to remove the limits on imports of cars made for other markets progressively by 2001, the Government have been partly guided by the need to give the independent importers time to establish further their service networks in the UK.

Electricity

Mr. Boswell: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry if he will make a statement on *(a)* the difficulties in the process of introducing full competition in the domestic electricity market two years ago, *(b)* the undertakings he gave on the timetable for market opening and *(c)* the actions he took to accelerate the process of market opening. [85609]

Mr. Battle: On coming to office, it was clear that the Government would have to give a strong lead to this work in order to see it successfully completed. I commissioned a report from the then DGES on the status of the programme soon after taking office. That report and one from his programme manager was published on 29 May 1997 and provided a sound way forward upon which the industry was prepared to commit to delivery.

Among the difficulties which have been faced have been the sheer size of the task and the level of technical complexity involved. The task of putting in place the vital IT infrastructure which is required to make the competition process work was one of the largest and most difficult in the world. I have worked hard to ensure that competition was introduced in a sensible, systematic way which ensured that customers were paramount and have conducted a series of meetings with the companies, the Regulator, the Electricity Pool and the programme managers to ensure that any difficulties were ironed out.

It was intended by the previous Government that supply competition would be introduced from April 1998. However, a realistic programme of work had not been put in place to support delivery by that date. Despite the efforts of the industry during 1998, the April date proved unachievable with fully tested systems. At a meeting I held on 22 January 1998 with the DGES, representatives from the electricity industry agreed to accept a target of rolling out competition between September 1998 and June 1999. The first areas to open to full competition did so on 14 September last year. Competition was introduced in each PES area in three planned stages over six months. A comprehensive testing programme was put in place to establish whether systems could interact effectively. The market was declared fully open on 24 May, a month ahead of schedule, by the DGES. The DGES will be monitoring for some time to come to ensure that the mechanics supporting the change of supplier process are working effectively and that the companies adopt a reasonable approach to doorstep selling. Consumers across the country should now benefit from lower prices and a better level of service.

Mr. Boswell: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry if he will list *(a)* the decisions announced in section 36 and section 14 consents for gas-fired electricity power plants during 1999 and *(b)* the factors determining whether such applications were approved or refused. [85610]

Mr. Battle: As promised in the Energy Sources White Paper, all decisions have been duly reported to Parliament. Members can also consult the actual decision letters, copies of which have also been placed in the Library of the House.

Miss McIntosh: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what plans he has to review the Electricity Act 1989 with regard to access for way leaves and compensation to be paid. [85546]

Mr. Battle: My right hon. Friend has no plans to review the wayleave provisions of the Electricity Act 1989.

Foresight Programme

Mr. Coaker: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what progress is being made in promoting the involvement of Government departments in the Foresight Programme. [85729]

Mr. Battle: The latest Whitehall Foresight progress report was published on 26 May. Copies have been placed in the Libraries of both Houses. The report provides examples of what Departments are doing to promote Foresight and to respond to Foresight priorities and recommendations. It also outlines Departments' initial plans for participation in the new round of Foresight which started on 1 April. Overall, it reflects significant forward progress since the last report published in June 1998.

Export Credits Guarantee Department

Mr. McNulty: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what plans he has to review the way in which ECGD assesses risk. [85820]

Mr. Byers: My hon. Friend the Financial Secretary and I have agreed, in view of recent global economic turmoil and its adverse impact on ECGD's ability to meet its financial objective, to put in train an independent review of ECGD's Risk Management systems and processes.

The Terms of Reference for the Risk Management Review are:

To assist Her Majesty's Government in assessing the adequacy of risk management systems and processes of the Export Credits Guarantee Department, within the context of the Department's Mission and Financial objective. Specifically, the Consultants are required:

To assess the adequacy and robustness of the systems used by ECGD to assess, monitor and manage political and country risk. ECGD uses its Portfolio Management System (PMS) to assess and manage country risk exposure. In conjunction, it operates risk monitoring systems and statistical models to assess the likelihood of longer term break-even. Are there measures which could be taken to improve these systems?

To assess the adequacy and effectiveness of ECGD's operational controls in relation to its systems for assessment and management of political and country risk, having regard to best commercial practice. ECGD's activities are governed by a set of operational controls, involving delegated authorities from the Treasury as well as internal delegated authorities, coupled with checks and balances to ensure that risk assessments are kept separate from decisions on cover availability and premium for particular markets. Could these operational controls be improved?

In the light of these assessments to make recommendations for strengthening ECGD's risk management systems and operational controls.

In undertaking this assignment, the Consultant should have regard for best commercial practice in risk management in the financial services market, in particular banking and insurance practices, in the public and private sectors.

The systems, controls and procedures relating to the management of political and country risk to be reviewed will include:

Within ECGD, the market and portfolio controls represented by the Portfolio Management System and the role of the Market Committee (including the Amber Zone Budget and Amber Zone Delegated Authorities);

The allocation of roles and responsibilities for risk management and underwriting in ECGD and to consider whether the risk management function has sufficient authority;

Outside ECGD, the roles of the Export Guarantees Advisory Council, the Whitehall Economic Sub Group (ESG), the Export Guarantees Committee (EGC) and of other Departments;

The adequacy and robustness of management information available to underpin ECGD risk management decisions and actions;

Whether its systems have enabled ECGD to react quickly enough to material events affecting their risk situation—for example, whether the time frames under which country risk assessments and country cover decisions take place, are appropriate;

Whether ECGD's exposure management is robust. For example, does it enable ECGD to avoid over-concentration of risk, and monitor and control effectively the changing risk profile of ECGD's exposures?

Is accountability for risk and risk decisions within ECGD and HMG sufficiently clear and unambiguous?

Whether the internal financial and operational control regimes, ethos and culture in ECGD adequately provide the emphasis and incentives to deliver the risk-reward balance which Ministers have specified in relation to ECGD; and how these control systems compare to good risk management practice in the private sector.

Whether the internal operational control regimes, ethos and culture in the relevant parts of the Treasury adequately provide the emphasis and incentives to deliver the risk-reward balance which Ministers have specified in relation to ECGD.

ECGD and Treasury are jointly inviting bids from suitably qualified consultants to conduct the Review.

Soya Beans

Joan Ruddock: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what reports his Department has received concerning the efforts of the state Government of Rio Grande do Sol to guarantee non-genetically modified soya bean production throughout their state; and what plans his Department has to give assistance. [84504]

Mr. Battle: My hon. Friend the Member for Hornsey and Wood Green (Mrs. Roche), the then Under-Secretary with responsibility for Small Firms, received a courtesy call from the Governor of Rio Grande do Sol on 25 September 1997, following a visit she made to Brazil in June 1997. The call focused on general trade relations. The issue of genetically modified soya beans was not raised during this meeting.

No reports have been received on this issue by DTI Ministers or officials.

Manufacturing

Mr. Mitchell: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry if he will make a statement on the change in the balance of manufactured trade over the last three years. [82388]

Mr. Byers *[holding answer 6 May 1999]:* The manufacturing trade deficit rose between 1996 and 1998 at a time of deteriorating global economic prospects. However, the tough and decisive action this Government have taken will ensure that the UK steers a course of lasting stability, and is well positioned to take advantage of opportunities once world conditions pick-up.

Petrol Retailers

Mr. Woolas: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what plans he has to instruct the Office of Fair Trading to enforce fair trading practices in the operation of contracts between oil companies and petrol retailers. [8[illegible]62]

Dr. Howells: Contractual issues are a matter for the individual parties concerned rather than the Director-General of Fair Trading. Insofar as these do raise competition concerns, the Director-General has powers to investigate and take action.

Strategic Export Controls

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what was the nature of the aircraft engine spares temporarily exported to Yugoslavia, listed in the first Annual report on Strategic Export Controls. [85119]

Dr. Howells: I refer the hon. Member to the answer given to my hon. Friend the Member for Norwich, North (Dr. Gibson) by the Minister of State, Foreign and Commonwealth Office, my hon. Friend the Member for Manchester, Central (Mr. Lloyd) on 21 May 1998, *Official Report*, column *532*.

Open Government

Dr. David Clark: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry how many applications for information he received under the "Open Government: Code of Practice on Access to Government Information" in the last parliamentary session; and how many of these applications were granted. [83120]

Mr. Byers *[holding answer 10 May 1999]:* Statistics on the handling of applications for information under the "Open Government: Code of Practice on Access to Government Information" are compiled on an annual, calendar year (rather than parliamentary session) basis for inclusion in the annual Monitoring Report. Although all requests for information are handled in terms of the "Code", the Department of Trade and Industry (excluding Government Offices) received 30 formal, identifiable requests under the "Code" in 1998; information was refused under one or more "Code" exemptions in 15 cases.

RDX Explosives

Mr. Harvey: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what export licences his Department has issued for RDX explosives since September 1998; and how many applications are pending. [84646]

Dr. Howells: The entry in the legislation under which the export of goods is controlled is known as their rating and most ratings cover a range of goods. RDX in its raw form is controlled under entry ML8 in Part III of Schedule 1 to the Export of Goods (Control) Order 1994 as amended, commonly known as the Military List.

The Export Control Organisation's computer databases have been interrogated, and the following results obtained. As of 6 May 1999, 27 Standard Individual Export Licences (SIELs) are recorded as having been issued since 1 September 1998 for the export of goods with the rating ML8. The paper records of these licences have been examined; 2 SIELs covered the export of RDX in its raw form. Since 1 September 1998, no Open Individual Export Licences have been issued for the export of such goods.

Number of Standard Individual Export Licences covering the export of RDX in its raw form

Destination	*Number*
Belgium	1
Kuwait	1

At 6 May 1999, decisions had not yet been taken on 10 applications for SIELs to export goods rated ML8. The paper records for these applications have been examined, and seven covered RDX in its raw form: 4 covering exports to the USA, 1 covering exports to China, 1 covering exports to Japan and 1 covering exports to the Irish Republic. There are no pending applications for OIELs covering goods with the rating ML8.

This information should be considered in light of the answer given by my hon. Friend the Member for Hornsey and Wood Green (Mrs. Roche), to my hon. Friend the Member for Don Valley (Caroline Flint), 30 October 1997, *Official Report*, columns *870–71*.

All applications for licences to export goods entered in Part III of Schedule 1 to the Export of Goods (Control) Order 1994 are assessed against the criteria announced by my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs on 28 July 1997, *Official Report*, columns *26–29*, and the European Union Code of Conduct on Arms Exports.

CityFlyer Express—BA Merger

Mr. Hoyle: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what meetings he has held with CityFlyer Express to discuss the proposed merger with British Airways. [85221]

Dr. Howells: My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry has had no meetings with CityFlyer Express.

BNFL (Millennium Compliance)

Mr. Hoyle: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry if he will make a statement on BNFL's progress in becoming year 2000 compliant. [85216]

Mr. Battle: The nuclear industry is judged to have Action 2000 "blue" status, meaning that the assessment has not identified any risk of material disruption.

The Health and Safety Executive's Nuclear Installations Inspectorate (NII) is the body responsible for regulating the safety of civil nuclear installations. NII has been active in dealing with the year 2000 issue since 1997 and has directed all nuclear licensees, under a licence condition, to provide safety cases a minimum of six weeks in advance of critical dates. NII will allow continued operation of nuclear plant over the critical dates only if it is satisfied that the operation is safe.

NII is also carrying out a programme of inspection and assessment of licensees' work in this area as it proceeds. To date, all the licensees, including BNFL, are making satisfactory progress in their programmes of work and this assists NII's confidence that the safety cases will be adequate. Should they not be, NII will use its enforcement powers to see that effective improvements are made or, the plant taken out of operation.

Sheltered Accommodation

Mr. Andy King: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what legal rights tenants in sheltered accommodation have to have access to their individual fuel meters in cases where meters are centralised in a locked location. [85116]

Mr. Battle: Regulations made under The Gas Act provide gas customers with a statutory right of access to their meters. The Electricity does not provide the basis for such a right for electricity customers. The Government has made clear:

its intention to legislate, when Parliamentary time permits, to reform the way in which the public utilities are regulated

that the regulatory process should be driven by the need to put the interests of customers first.

The aim is to bring the regulatory regimes for gas and electricity together where it is sensible to do so.

Inflatable Bouncing Devices (Injuries)

Dr. Tony Wright: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry if he will collect data on accident and injury figures with respect to inflatable bouncing devices. [85503]

Dr. Howells: Data on accidents with respect to inflatable bouncing devices are collected under the DTI's Home Accident Surveillance System. This records information on home and leisure accidents resulting in patients attending Accident and Emergency Departments at a representative sample of hospitals throughout the country. The most recent data for these devices are:

1997	*National Estimate*	
	Home	*Leisure*
Bouncing castles	2,326	5,519
Other inflatable equipment	99	690

BNFL (KPMG Reports)

Mr. Jack: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry by what means and for what reason reports of the findings by KPMG setting out on the future structure and ownership of BNFL made their way into the public domain before Parliament was informed of them. [85145]

Mr. Battle *[holding answer 25 May 1999]*: I cannot comment on speculative references in the press about the KPMG report. An announcement will be made in due course.

Documentation

Mr. Chidgey: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry if he will list those purposes for which his Department and its executive agencies require a birth certificate to be furnished by *(a)* employees, *(b)* contractors, *(c)* those applying for employment or contracts and *(d)* other persons. [85317]

Mr. Byers: In DTI and some of its agencies a birth certificate is one of a variety of documents which applicants for jobs may choose to offer as proof of identity and of age, for pension services, prior to or at recruitment. It is a mandatory requirement in the Radiocommunications Agency, the Patent Office and the National Weights and Measures Laboratory. In the event of the death of a Departmental employee in service, his or her children's full birth certificates are required in order to verify dates of birth for dependants' benefits under the relevant pensions arrangements. Contractors are responsible for establishing proof of the identity of their employees. Birth certificates are not required routinely for any other Departmental purposes; however, they can be offered by claimants under the Enemy Property Compensation Scheme to help establish the validity of such claims in particular lines of inheritance; and they may, in very limited circumstances, be demanded under a number of statutory powers of investigation, for example under Section 434 of the Companies Act 1985.

Clothing and Textiles

Mr. Gordon Prentice: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what discussions he has had with UK retailers concerning their sourcing policies for clothing and textiles; and if he will make a statement. [85330]

Mr. Battle: Sourcing decisions are, of course, for retailers themselves to take, based upon their own commercial judgment. However, my Department is involved in a number of initiatives designed to promote the competitiveness of UK textiles and clothing manufacturers, as well as the efficiency of the UK supply chain. For instance, in February this year I was pleased to announce that the DTI would be providing the secretariat for the Textiles and Clothing Strategy Group, a joint industry—union initiative to consider how best to ensure the sustainable development of the UK's textile and clothing industry. The retail sector is represented on that Group.

In addition, the DTI is a co-sponsor of the "Apparel and Textiles Challenge", a joint initiative with retailers and manufacturers to improve relationships in, and management of, the clothing and textile supply chain. Developments such as E-Commerce, internet and mail order selling, demand ever shorter delivery times and necessitate a quick response service from manufacturers which UK suppliers are well placed to meet.

Special Advisers

Mr. Tyrie: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry, pursuant to his answer of 29 March 1999, *Official Report*, column *493*, on special advisers, if he will give the total travel cost of each occasion when *(a)* departmental and *(b)* non-departmental advisers have travelled abroad in an official capacity since 2 May 1997 and the place visited. [82416]

Mr. Byers: For the period 2 May 1997 to 31 March 1999, Special Advisers in my Department have travelled overseas in an official capacity on 12 occasions. The total cost of travel and any hotel accommodation is:

£

	Country	*Total cost*
1997		
25–28 May	Japan	6,184.00
10–11 September	Washington DC	5,088.50
13 October	Brussels	301.50
12–13 November	Brussels	390.90
15–22 November	India and Australia	7,142.68
1998		
11–18 January	China, Hong Kong	4,421.70
3–4 February	Paris	381.00
11 March	Strasbourg	542.80
6–7 May	Brussels	295.00
18–20 May	Geneva	598.67
18–20 June	Singapore	5,898.30
10–16 October	USA	7,024.44

All travel complied with the requirements of the Ministerial Code and the Civil Service Management Code.

Insolvency and Bankruptcy Law

Mr. Chope: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry if he will announce the membership and terms of reference of the working group he has appointed to report on how insolvency and bankruptcy law can be made more enterprise-friendly. [69847]

Dr. Howells *[holding answer 8 February 1999]*: This work was undertaken by government officials and focused on:

- The extend to which insolvency and bankruptcy laws place undue obstacles in the way of entrepreneurs who have failed but want to try again.
- The extent to which the law reinforces the stigma attached to business failure and thereby inhibits enterprise.
- The extent to which it is or would be possible to distinguish between responsible risk-takers and others.

Officials reported to Ministers at the end of April and that report is under consideration.

Written Answers to Questions

Tuesday 8 June 1999

ATTORNEY-GENERAL

Paul Marc Hobson

Mr. Corbyn: To ask the Attorney-General on what grounds he decided not to exercise his discretion under the Northern Ireland (Emergency Provisions) Act 1996 to certify that the charge of murder of Robert Hamill against Paul Marc Hobson be not treated as a scheduled offence. [85494]

The Attorney-General: In determining whether or not to certify that an offence should be treated as a non scheduled offence, I take into account the circumstances of the case on the basis of a note and recommendation furnished on behalf of the Director of Public Prosecutions for Northern Ireland. In the case of Paul Marc Hobson, who faced a charge of murdering Robert Hamill, on the basis of the information available to me, I took the view that the offence was connected with the emergency and declined to issue a certificate.

PRESIDENT OF THE COUNCIL

Millennium Compliance

Mr. Coleman: To ask the President of the Council, pursuant to her answer of 20 April 1999, *Official Report*, columns *480–81*, when the Government will issue further public information on the likely impact of the millennium bug. [86303]

Mrs. Beckett: I have today placed copies of the new public information booklet "The Millennium Bug—Facts Not Fiction" in the Libraries of the House. This has been compiled by Action 2000 on behalf of the Government for the general public and explains what the Millennium Bug is and how it could affect people in their everyday lives. It covers domestic appliances, home personal computers, shops and petrol stations, health, travel, personal finance, insurance and utilities.

The booklet will be distributed as an insert in most Sunday newspapers on 13 June and in TV listings guides the following week. It will also be available at main Post Office counters from 14 June. The booklet will be supported by TV, radio and press advertising.

DEFENCE

Vaccines

Mr. Steinberg: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will make a statement on the recent work of his Department's vaccine fact-finding team with particular reference to the findings relating to the presence of squalene in blood samples provided by US and British veterans. [83015]

Mr. Doug Henderson: The MOD's Fact Finding Team within the Gulf Veterans' Illnesses Unit (GVIU) was established in September 1997 to look into the implementation in-theatre of the 1991 immunisation programme against biological warfare agents, with particular reference to the level of coverage and uptake of vaccine across the various units of the UK Armed Forces that participated in the Gulf conflict. This review is based on oral testimony and extant documentary evidence, with a view to making public as much information as possible. The team's fieldwork was completed last autumn and a paper based on their work, and on other contemporary material that has been located, is in the course of preparation. This will be published once it is completed, which is expected to be within the next three months.

This review is aimed at providing more information about how the immunisation programme was carried out in principle, not the compositions of the vaccines used, which have already been set out in the MOD paper "Background to the Use of Medical Countermeasures to Protect British Forces during the Gulf War (Operation GRANBY)".

Mr. Steinberg: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence which vaccines were acquired from the USA for the use of British soldiers in the Gulf War; which vaccines were used; and which contained squalene. [83014]

Mr. Doug Henderson: Details of the Ministry of Defence's programme to immunise UK troops against the potential threat posed by Iraq's biological weapons during the Gulf conflict were published in October 1997, in the MOD paper "Background to the Use of Medical Countermeasures to Protect British Forces during the Gulf War (Operation GRANBY)". This describes in detail how a vaccine against plague was purchased from the US DoD for use by UK forces. None of the other vaccines used for this programme were acquired from the US. None of the vaccines used for this programme contained squalene. In addition, UK Service personnel would have received other immunisations against disease that potentially posed a public health threat. So far as has been ascertained, none of the latter vaccines were either acquired from the US or contained squalene.

Mr. Steinberg: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if *(a)* his Department, *(b)* the Defence and Evaluation Research Agency and *(c)* the Chemical and Biological Defence Establishment produced vaccines or components of vaccines for use on Gulf War troops which contained squalene preparations. [83013]

Mr. Doug Henderson: No.

Strategic Export Controls

Mr. Hancock: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will list those countries to which the sale of military aircraft has been stopped in each of the last five years, indicating the reasons for the decision in each case. [84524]

Mr. Spellar: On 25 March 1999, *Official Report*, column *343*, my hon. Friend the Minister of State, Foreign and Commonwealth Office announced that the

Government had published its first Annual Report on Strategic Export Controls. The Report contains, by rating, details of all licences refused or revoked by the Government between 2 May and 31 December 1997, and none of these covered military aircraft. A report covering 1998 will be issued in due course.

It would not be possible to provide validated data for previous years without significant inter-departmental effort and incurring disproportionate cost.

Gulf War Illnesses

Mr. David Heath: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence (1) what investigations have been undertaken into the physical rather than epidemiological aspects of illnesses exhibited by Gulf War veterans; [84354]

(2) what research has been undertaken into appropriate treatments for illness exhibited by Gulf war veterans. [84353]

Mr. Doug Henderson: The Government have pledged that appropriate research will be carried out into Gulf veterans' illnesses. In addition to two major epidemiological studies, the Ministry of Defence has in place a neuromuscular symptoms study. This study involves carrying out clinical tests on UK Gulf veterans. A separate study is examining the possible interactions between the various medical countermeasures used to protect UK personnel during the Gulf conflict, which includes laboratory research involving animals. These four research studies are complemented by an independent review of relevant research literature. A further study, which is being funded by the United States Government, is being undertaken by King's College, London. This study includes clinical tests on UK Gulf veterans.

Any UK Gulf veterans concerned about their health can seek a referral to the Gulf veterans' Medical Assessment Programme (MAP) for advice and a full medical. The assessment comprises various standard investigations and any further tests considered clinically appropriate by the MAP physician to provide as full a diagnosis as possible of any medical symptoms which a patient may be exhibiting. MAP physicians provide diagnostic information and recommend any appropriate treatment to the veteran's doctor. It is the veteran's doctor's responsibility to arrange any treatment and to monitor progress. A paper on the clinical findings from the first 1,000 patients seen by the MAP was published in the "British Medical Journal" on 30 January. A copy of this paper has already been placed in the Library of the House.

There is now strong scientific evidence, following the publication of a number of research papers over recent months, that Gulf veterans report more ill-health than other comparable groups. A further hypothesis, that Gulf veterans are not all suffering from a single illness, seems to be gaining support. However, there is still no medical or scientific consensus about the aetiology of the illnesses being suffered by some Gulf veterans. Nevertheless, the need for further research work in the light of emerging study findings in the UK and elsewhere (most notably from the United States), is kept under regular review by the Ministry of Defence and by the Medical Research Council (MRC), which advises the Government on its overall strategy for Gulf health issues. So far, the MRC has not recommended that the Ministry of Defence commissions research into possible treatments.

Nevertheless, the Ministry of Defence is aware that the United States Government announced in March that it would be beginning two medical treatment trials—an antibiotic treatment trial and exercise-behavioural therapy—in April to evaluate possible therapeutic approaches to improving Gulf veterans' health. The Ministry of Defence will monitor the outcome of these trials.

Military Uniforms (Overseas Manufacture)

Mr. Cox: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will list those British military uniforms which are produced by overseas countries; and if he will list the countries that make such equipment. [84965]

Mr. Doug Henderson: This is a matter for the Chief Executive of the Defence Clothing and Textiles Agency. I have asked the Chief Executive to write to the hon. Member.

Letter from Michael Roycroft to Mr. Tom Cox, dated 8 June 1999:

I am replying to your question to the Secretary of State for Defence as this matter falls within my area of responsibility. You ask that we provide a list of those British military uniforms which are produced by overseas countries and the countries that make such equipment.

Unfortunately, we are unable to provide the requested information. The Defence Clothing and Textiles Agency (DCTA) is responsible for the procurement of all clothing items for the Armed Forces. The vast majority of DCTA purchases are made-up garments, with MOD having no requirement for contractors to specify the country of origin of the textiles used to make the items, and there is no remit on DCTA to record such information.

We can, however, provide some analysis of clothing contracts. Current figures indicate that around 73% by value of DCTA clothing contracts for 1998/99 were awarded to UK firms, leaving 27% to overseas firms. As required by Government Accounting, DCTA must advertise all potential contracts valued greater than £160,670 in the European Journal, which certainly attracts overseas contractors. There can, therefore, be no "buy British" policy for Defence Textiles. The only contractual stipulation regarding the country of manufacture is that 10% of garments must be made at the main contractor's accredited facilities.

Of paramount importance is to ensure that fabrics meet the MOD's demanding specification, such as fibre content, wear quality and fire retardancy and the country of manufacture is secondary. All firms, from UK and abroad, utilise cloth manufactured overseas and whilst DCTA could certainly provide examples of countries supplying textiles, this information is considered nugatory as it would not give the comprehensive answer that you seek.

I am sorry I am unable to provide the information in the form it was requested.

Military Service

Mr. Healey: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what definition his Department uses of *(a)* active service and *(b)* conflict zone, in respect of military service. [84938]

Mr. Spellar: *(a)* I refer my hon. Friend to the reply given by the then Minister of State for the Armed Forces to my hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham, Northfield (Mr. Burden) on 9 March 1998, *Official Report*, column *46*. *(b)* The Department has no definition of a conflict zone, as this expression has no recognised meaning.

Gulf War (Post-traumatic Stress Disorder)

Mr. Malins: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence how many civilians were seconded to the armed forces during the Gulf Crisis; and, of those, how many are known to be suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder. [84952]

Mr. Doug Henderson: Civilians, including foreign nationals, based in the UK and overseas, played a vital role in supporting British Forces during the 1990–1991 Gulf conflict, but the precise number seconded (that is attached to British Forces) has not been determined.

However, a review of Ministry of Defence (MOD) records shows that on 22 February 1991, 931 MOD civilian staff were reported as being in the Gulf theatre, but not all were working in direct support of British Forces. Of these, 785 were members of the Royal Fleet Auxiliary. In addition, there were a significant number of civilian contractors' employees working in direct support of British Forces in the Gulf theatre. My Department conservatively estimates that the number of civilian contractors' employees involved would have been in excess of 1,000 people.

MOD is aware of two civilians who claim to have post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) as a result of their time in the Gulf during the conflict. MOD has no mechanisms in place for routinely monitoring the health of its employees, ex-employees, contractors' employees or foreign nationals. However, civilians who provided direct support to British Forces in theatre during the Gulf conflict can be referred by their GP for examination at the MOD's Medical Assessment Programme (MAP). As at 26 May 1999, 14 civilians had been seen by MAP physicians.

European Defence and Security

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will make a statement on his contribution to the debate at the WEU Council of 10 May on European Defence and Security after Amsterdam; what *(a)* matters and *(b)* documents were discussed; and what decisions were taken. [85523]

Mr. George Robertson: I was unable to attend the WEU Council meeting on 10 May because of Defence Questions in the House and was therefore represented by a Senior official from my Department. I was present at the session on 11 May.

One of the major points of business was continuing the process of informal reflection on European security and defence issues, initiated at the WEU meeting in Rome last November. Particular points emphasised in the discussion included: the need to rectify shortfalls in European military capability; the need to strengthen the EU's Common Foreign and Security Policy, including by giving the EU the means to decide on military matters and take political control of crisis management operations; the importance of involving the non-EU European Allies, and the Associate Partners, in future arrangements; and the continuing importance of NATO as the cornerstone of European security and defence policy. No documents were considered or decisions taken on these matters. A number of papers relating to other aspects of WEU business were noted or endorsed by Ministers at their meetings.

Armed Forces (Manning Level)

Mr. Blunt: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what were the *(a)* actual manning and *(b)* establishment levels of the (i) Royal Navy (excluding the Royal Marines), (ii) Army, (iii) Royal Air Force and (iv) Royal Marines as at 31 March. [85910]

Mr. Doug Henderson: Personnel statistics are produced for the beginning of each month. As at 1 April 1999, the trained and untrained strengths and establishment (trained requirement) levels for each of the Services were as follows:

Service	*Trained strength (a)*	*Untrained strength (b)*	*Total strength (c) = (a) + (b)*	*Trained requirement (d)*
RN	33,204	3,743	36,947	34,556
Army[1]	96,300	13,422	109,772	[2]102,389
RAF	51,761	3,452	55,213	53,024
RM	5,867	887	6,754	6,387

[1] The Army figures are for UK Regulars; they do not include Gurkhas or Royal Irish Regiment (Home Service). If Gurkhas were included, the Army Strength would be 99,674, and Requirement would be 105,271.
[2] To implement the Post-SDR force structure, the Army's Requirement for UK Regulars will increase to 105,335 by 1 April 2005.

Battalion Parachute Regiments

Mr. Keith Simpson: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what is the (i) established strength and (ii) recruited strength of *(a)* 1, *(b)* 2, *(c)* 3, *(d)* 4 and *(e)* 10 Battalion Parachute Regiments. [85625]

Mr. Doug Henderson: The actual strength of the Battalions as at 1 April 1999, and their current and post-SDR liability, is detailed in the following table.

	Current Liability (1 April 1999)	*Post SDR Liability*[1]	*Current Strength (1 April 1999)*
1 PARA	634	624	521
2 PARA	634	646	[3]534
3 PARA	608	646	485
4 PARA (TA)	531	[2]324	224
10 PARA (TA)	530	[2]—	129

[1] These liabilities take into account new changes approved by the SDR which have yet to be implemented.
[2] On 1 July 1999, 4 and 10 PARA will merge and form a new 4 PARA with Regimental Headquarters and a Company at Pudsey with a detachment at Consett, a Company in Glasgow and a Company in London with a detachment in Croydon.
[3] The strength of 2 PARA does not include the Gurkha Reinforcement Company (GRC) that is currently attached to it.
Note:
Liability and strength figures include all capbadges except the Gurkhas referred to in footnote [3].

Defence Evaluation and Research Agency

Mr. Laurence Robertson: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will make a statement on the future of the Defence Evaluation and Research Agency. [85648]

Mr. Spellar: I have nothing significant to add to the answer given by my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Defence on 5 May 1999, *Official Report*, columns *384–85*. Our consultation with stakeholders

continues and my right hon. Friend still hopes to be in a position to make an announcement on DERA's future later in the year.

Satellite Dishes

Mr. Key: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what is the cost of supplying and fitting a gyro-stabilised satellite television dish to a frigate. [82902]

Mr. Spellar: No MOD funded gyro-stabilised satellite television dishes have been fitted to RN frigates. However, this type of dish has been fitted to two aircraft carriers, HMS Invincible and HMS Illustrious, and will be fitted to the third, HMS Ark Royal, during her current refit. The estimated cost of each dish is £36,000, excluding installation costs, which are included in the refit costs and are not separately identifiable. The majority of the RN's major warships are currently fitted with conventional domestic satellite equipment which provides reception whilst in harbour in European waters. We are planning to enhance this facility by providing reception whilst the ships are at sea. Under the revised arrangements, ships' crews would be able to see broadcasts within about 12 hours of transmission.

Training Aircraft (India)

Mr. Hancock: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what negotiations he has held with the Indian Government over provision of new training aircraft for the Indian Air Force. [84525]

Mr. Spellar: Although officials from the Defence Export Services Organisation are aware of the Indian Government's potential interest in the Hawk Aircraft, no formal negotiations have been held between the Ministry of Defence and the Indian Government over the provision of a new training aircraft for the Indian Air Force.

Atomic Energy (Co-operation)

Mr. Llew Smith: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what recent reports he has received from his United States counterpart in respect of the security of confidential nuclear weapons design information originating in the United Kingdom and shared with the United States Department of Energy under bilateral atomic energy co-operation agreements. [84726]

Mr. George Robertson: I have received no such reports.

Honours, Decorations and Medals

Mr. Healey: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what are the roles and responsibilities of *(a)* Ministers and *(b)* officials in the process for determining eligibility for the award of the General Service Medal for a period of military service. [84934]

Mr. Spellar: The qualifying criteria for the award of clasps to the General Service Medal and General Service Medal 1962 are laid down in the appropriate Command Paper. Ministers have no responsibilities in the process of determining eligibility for these awards. Officials in the appropriate medal office are responsible for determining individual eligibility by comparing a person's Record of Service against the criteria published for the award of the medal and the relevant clasp.

Mr. Healey: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence (1) what are the terms of reference of the Committee of Honours, Decorations and Medals; [84936]

(2) what criteria the Committee on Honours, Decorations and Medals uses to determine whether a military event or service is eligible for the award of the General Service Medal; [84937]

(3) if he will list the members of the Committee on the Grant of Honours, Decorations and Medals; and who was responsible for appointing them. [84933]

Mr. Spellar: The Committee on the Award of Honours, Decorations and Medals is an official committee that reports directly to the Queen. I have therefore asked the Chairman of the Committee, Sir Richard Wilson, to write to the hon. Member with the information sought, and a copy will be placed in the Library of the House.

Kosovo

Mr. Keith Simpson: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence on what occasions the Prime Minister's Press Secretary has attended meetings in his Department at which ministers, officials and senior officers have been formulating policy on Kosovo. [85379]

Mr. George Robertson *[holding answer 25 May 1999]:* The Prime Minister's Press Secretary has attended a number of meetings in my Department, as the Prime Minister or I have required.

Military Discipline

Mr. Stinchcombe: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what steps he is taking to review military discipline for 15 to 18 year olds. [85496]

Mr. Doug Henderson: The UK does not recruit any personnel under the age of 16—and then only when an individual has completed his or her compulsory secondary schooling.

Discipline procedures in all three of the Armed Forces are kept under review at all times and amended as necessary. Major changes which require amendments to primary legislation are normally affected by the quinquennial Armed Forces Acts, which continue in force the three Service Discipline Acts (SDAs)—the Army Act 1955, the Air Force Act 1955 and the Naval Discipline Act 1957—and which include any amendments to reflect changes to civilian law over the preceding five years. Where there is a need, however, changes can be made by other legislative means. It is my Department's policy to preserve consistency as far as appropriate, practical and sensible, between civilian and military law; this applies equally to measures concerning those under the age of 18.

Pensions (Taxation)

Mr. Coaker: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will make a statement on progress made in discussions between his Department and the Inland Revenue regarding repayment of tax on pensions awarded prior to 31 March 1973 which have been reclassified. [85614]

Mr. Doug Henderson: The MOD is working closely with the Inland Revenue on the repayment of tax for the 179 Army pensioners identified as having had tax incorrectly deducted from their invalidity pension. The

affected pensioners will all receive a full refund of the tax wrongly paid since their discharge, together with a repayment supplement reflecting the interest which might have been accrued on the amount of tax wrongly paid. The repayment of tax is being processed in three stages: the first stage, the repayment of the current year's tax, has been completed; the second stage covers the period 1994–95 to 1997–98 for which records are held and repayments for this period will be made shortly. The final stage, which covers the period from the individual's discharge date to 1994, is more difficult to calculate as records of pension and tax paid are not held and therefore need to be recreated. This work is under-way and repayment will be made as soon as possible.

RAF Quedgeley

Mr. Drew: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what is the current status of the land that formerly constituted RAF Quedgeley. [85883]

Mr. Spellar: The areas formerly known as Sites 2, 4 and 6 and were sold on the open market during the latter part of 1997 and early 1998. That area of RAF Quedgeley known as Main Site was placed on the market in November 1997 and a preferred purchaser, Manor Farm Consortium, has been identified. Contract for Sale negotiations are now in hand.

Mr. Drew: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what discussions he has had with local councils and residents over the future of RAF Quedgeley during the last year. [85884]

Mr. Spellar: My Defence Estate officials have maintained close contact with both the County and Gloucester City Councils over the future of RAF Quedgeley. The City Council also jointly funded a feasibility study with MOD which made recommendations on appropriate forms of development for the re-use of the Main Site at Quedgeley.

Agents acting for my Department were also invited to make representation at the Gloucester County Structure Plan Examination in Public in September 1998. My officials also attended, and supported the City Council's aspirations for residential and employment uses on the site.

Correspondence

Mr. Duncan: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will reply to the letters dated 4 February and 4 May from the hon. Member for Rutland and Melton to the Minister for the Armed Forces in respect of the playing fields amenity at the site known as ABRO Old Dalby. [86112]

Mr. Spellar: I wrote to the hon. Member on 1 June.

Warships

Mr. Hancock: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what is the current operational life of *(a)* Sir Bedivere, *(b)* Sir Geraint and *(c)* Sir Percivale. [85959]

Mr. Spellar: It is planned to pay off RFA Bedivere in 2011, following an extension to her service life as a result of the recent Ship Life Extension programme. RFAs Sir Geraint and Sir Percivale have not been subject to similar life extension programmes and are expected to be withdrawn from service in 2003 and 2004 respectively, when they are due to be replaced by new vessels.

Mr. Hancock: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what is the cost and timescale for the Service Life Extension Programme for *(a)* Sir Bedivere, *(b)* Sir Geraint and *(c)* Sir Percivale; and when contracts will be let. [85956]

Mr. Spellar: The Ship Life Extension Programme of RFA Sir Bedivere started in November 1994 and completed in June 1998, at a cost of £68.8 million. In the light of experience gained from this work, the decision was taken not to pursue similar life extension programmes on either RFA Sir Geraint or on RFA Sir Percivale. It is planned that these two vessels will be replaced by new ships in 2003 and 2004 respectively.

Porton Down

Mr. Key: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence, pursuant to the answer of 14 May 1999, *Official Report*, column *215*, on Porton Down, what was the date of the Minister of Defence Procurement's visit. [85555]

Mr. Spellar: My noble Friend the Minister of State for Defence Procurement visited Porton Down during his term in office between September 1976 and May 1979. The diaries from that period do not record the exact date of the visit.

Trained Personnel

Mr. Keith Simpson: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what is the shortfall in numbers and percentage of trained personnel for the (i) Royal Navy, (ii) Army, (iii) Royal Air Force and (iv) Royal Marines. [85915]

Mr. Doug Henderson: The shortfall in numbers of trained personnel against the trained requirement as at 1 April 1999 (the latest figures available) is:

	Number/percentage
Royal Navy	1,352 (3.9%)
Army[1]	6,089 (5.9%)
Royal Air Force	1,263 (2.4%)
Royal Marines	520 (8.1%)

[1] The Army figure is for UK Regulars; it does not including Gurkhas or Royal Irish Regiment (Home Service). The Gurkha trained strength is 3,374, and trained requirement is 2,882, making a surplus of 492

ENVIRONMENT, TRANSPORT AND THE REGIONS

Radioactive Waste

Mr. Hancock: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if his Department has applied the tests set out in the Radioactive Waste Management Advisory Committee's September 1997 report on the Import and Export of Radioactive Waste to the reprocessing of German spent nuclear fuel at Sellafield. [82469]

Mr. Collins: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions (1) what plans he has to introduce legislation to make mandatory the tests set out by the Radioactive Waste Management Advisory Committee in its 1997 report on The Import and Export of Radioactive Waste; and if he will make a statement; [85463]

(2) what steps his Department takes to ensure that contracts for the reprocessing of spent nuclear fuel are compatible with the policy set out in the 1995 White Paper Review of Radioactive Waste Management Policy on the import and export of radioactive waste; [85462]

(3) if he will order an independent inquiry to establish whether current contracts for the reprocessing of foreign spent nuclear fuel in the UK meet the tests recommended by the Radioactive Waste Management Advisory Committee in its 1997 report on The Import and Export of Radioactive Waste; and if he will make a statement. [85464]

Mr. Meacher *[holding answer 26 May 1999]:* The Radioactive Waste Management Advisory Committee's September 1997 report on The Import and Export of Radioactive Waste suggests

> "specific tests which ... the Government should, subject to consultation, give to the regulators as guidance on the practical application of policy on the import and export of radioactive wastes".

As spent nuclear fuel has not traditionally been defined as radioactive waste, the tests outlined do not apply to the import of materials for reprocessing.

Mr. Llew Smith: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what discussions he has had with *(a)* BNFL and *(b)* the United States Nuclear Authorities in respect of BNFL proposals to import irradiated spent nuclear fuel from the US-based Yankee Power utility for storage at Sellafield. [85615]

Mr. Meacher: DETR has not entered into discussions with either party on this issue, neither has it been party to any discussions BNFL might have had.

Genetically Modified Crops

Ms Drown: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions, pursuant to his answer of 12 May 1999, *Official Report*, column *151*, on genetically-modified crops, how much money the Government will spend in total on *(a)* funding and *(b)* subsidising (i) farm-scale evaluations and (ii) other trial sites for genetically-modified crops in 1999; and how much money has been allocated for the same purposes in 2000. [85272]

Mr. Meacher: The total cost to Government of funding ecological studies as part of the farm scale evaluations in 1999–2000 is £233,000, this includes all the farms, not just the one near Swindon. The expected figure for 2000–01 is £702,000. There is no subsidy. The industry grouping SCIMAC is covering the whole cost of growing the crops for the farm scale evaluations. SCIMAC are providing the GM seeds for the paired comparisons of GM and non GM crops, and funding their growing and management on the farm and the disposal of the produce.

The Government are not spending any public money on the funding or subsidising of other trial sites of genetically modified crops in either year.

Road Noise Mitigation

Mr. Fallon: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions, pursuant to his answer to the hon. Member for Chatham and Aylesford (Mr. Shaw) of 22 March 1999, *Official Report*, columns *50–1*, on road noise mitigation if tunnel roads include motorways; over what period the 80dB(A) noise level will be measured; and whether local authorities will be provided with the noise level predictions for the design years of the roads which may qualify in their area. [85439]

Ms Glenda Jackson: Nearly all motorways are included within the trunk road network.

The noise level criterion of 80dB(A) is applied to an estimate of roadside noise based on readily available traffic information such as vehicle types, speeds and road surface. The estimate used is the average hourly L_{10} level over a typical weekday between the hours of 6am and 12 midnight.

On request, local authorities can be provided with information in this form.

Ministerial Meetings

Mr. Jenkin: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will list the occasions since 1 May 1997 on which *(a)* he and *(b)* his ministers have had meetings concerning the implementation of the Government's transport policy with the Road Haulage Association, indicating in each case (i) the purpose and nature of the meeting, (ii) the duration of the meeting, (iii) the location of the meeting and (iv) those who attended. [85484]

Ms Glenda Jackson: Full details in answer to this question can be provided only at disproportionate cost.

My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State and his transport ministerial team since the General Election, have had many meetings both formal and informal with senior representatives of the Road Haulage Association (RHA) at which transport issues have been discussed. The inaugural meeting of the Road Haulage Forum was recently chaired by the then Minister for Transport, my right hon. Friend the Member for Hamilton, North and Bellshill (Dr. Reid) and attended by my noble Friend the Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State on 8 April. My right hon. Friend, the then Minister for Transport also attended the RHA annual dinner on 11 May.

Barnet Football Club

Mr. Dismore: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will make a statement on the progress in respect of its planning decision in relation to Barnet Football Club, Copthall Stadium. [85617]

Mr. Caborn: My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State refused planning permission on 3 June. A copy of the decision letter has been sent to my hon. Friend.

Regional Development Agencies

Mr. Boswell: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions when regional development agencies will publish their required strategies. [86100]

Mr. Caborn: We expect RDAs to submit their initial strategies to Ministers in the Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions by October 1999. The RDAs have all begun involving regional partners in drawing up their regional strategies. Draft versions of the strategies will be produced for consultation over the summer.

Thameslink

Mr. Brake: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what assessment he has made of passenger loading on the Thameslink rail route. [85691]

Ms Glenda Jackson: Passenger counts are required by the terms of Thameslink's franchise agreement. The last counts were undertaken in the Autumn of 1998; and the results published on 29 March 1999 showed passenger loadings to be above the contractual threshold. In accordance with the contractual obligations of their franchise agreement Thameslink is producing for the Franchising Director a Feasibility Study considering options for additional capacity.

Mr. Dismore: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will make a statement on the planned reduction in service by Thameslink, to and from Hendon. [85712]

Ms Glenda Jackson: Thameslink have made marginal changes to peak services in their Summer 1999 timetable. One morning train no longer calls at Hendon. The minimum level of service which the operator must provide is set out in the Passenger Service Requirement (PSR) which is the key part of the franchise agreement under which services are provided. PSRs are based on the services which were being operated by British Rail at the time of franchising. Thameslink's PSR specifies a weekly half hourly service between Hendon and London. In the Summer 1999 timetable Hendon continues to receive 60 services from London Kings Cross Thameslink and 63 services to London Kings Cross Thameslink.

Railway Rolling Stock

Mr. Brake: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what discussions he has had with the Rail Regulator on the transfer of rolling stock between Train Operating Companies to reduce over-crowding. [85692]

Ms Glenda Jackson: Overcrowding is an issue addressed in franchise agreements between the Franchising Director and the Train Operating Companies (TOCs). The Franchising Director has facilitated discussions between TOCs for the transfer of rolling stock to address overcrowding. Such transfers are contractual matters between TOCs and discussions are currently taking place which if implemented would reduce overcrowding on some of the worst affected services in the South East.

Environmental Assessment

Mr. Burns: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if the environmental assessment regimes for afforestation, land drainage, salmon farming, harbours, electricity lines, pipe-lines and applications under the Transport and Works Act 1992 comply with EU Directive 97/11 on environmental assessment. [86049]

Mr. Raynsford: Responsibility for the consent regimes referred to in this question falls to five Government Departments. For convenience, I am replying on behalf of the other Departments as well as my Department.

Directive 97/11/EC amends Directive 85/337/EEC on environmental impact assessment. The amended procedures have been applied to land drainage projects which require planning permission and to fish farming in marine waters, which includes salmon farming.

Regulations to implement the amended Directive for the other consent regimes have yet to be finalised but these should come into force by the end of the year. Meanwhile extant regulations ensure that projects considered under these consent regimes are subject to environmental impact assessment before they may proceed. Pending entry into force of the amending regulations, administrative arrangements provide for the additional requirements of Directive 97/11/EC to be complied with in most cases.

Local Authority Debt

Mr. Clifton-Brown: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will list the 10 most indebted local authorities in *(a)* 1997 and *(b)* 1998, indicating the cost (i) in total and (ii) per council tax payer of servicing the debt; and what plans he has to ensure that the debt level is reduced. [85776]

Ms Armstrong: The available information is given in the table. The cost of servicing the debt has been defined in terms of external interest paid by local authorities in the financial year 1997–98. It should be noted that authorities with high levels of debt are generally those which have undertaken capital investment and that longer term borrowing to finance capital expenditure is regulated by Government through the issue of credit approvals, for which support is provided through the Standard Spending Assessment mechanism.

It is for local authorities to determine arrangements for the prudent management and repayment of debt. We are currently examining options for encouraging earlier debt redemption.

Local authority [1]	*Total external interest payments* [2] *(£ million)*	*External interest payments per adult* [3] *(£)*
Birmingham	109.1	145
Manchester	115.9	370
Lambeth	78.4	386
Islington	88.0	640
Sheffield	77.7	187
Liverpool	75.3	214
Leeds	64.3	114

Local authority [1]	Total external interest payments [2] (£ million)	External interest payments per adult [3] (£)
Southwark	71.8	415
Hackney	59.4	421
Tower Hamlets	63.6	496

[1] 10 authorities with highest level of outstanding debt as at 31 March 1997

[2] Source: Revenue Summary (RS) outturn form for 1997/98.

[3] Data on the number of council taxpayers is not readily available. The figures are based on the number of resident adults, mid-year 1997 population estimates.

Airports (Runway Space)

Mrs. Dunwoody: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what plans Her Majesty's Government have to secure the provision of extra runway space in the South-East of England. [85876]

Ms Glenda Jackson: On 11 March 1999, *Official Report*, columns *360–61*, we announced our decision to undertake a study of airport issues in the South-East and East of England. That study will consider future policies for these airports within the framework of the Government's sustainable development principles. It will, among other things, consider whether new runway capacity in the region might be justified, having regard to social, environmental and economic considerations.

Mrs. Dunwoody: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will ask the airport co-ordinator with responsibility for Heathrow, Gatwick and Stansted to make a statement on runway constraints. [85878]

Ms Glenda Jackson: The Airport Co-ordinator is not the appropriate person to make such a statement. The capacity of Heathrow, Gatwick and Stansted is assessed twice a year, for the summer and winter operating seasons, by the airport operator, in consultation with airport users, air traffic control and the airport co-ordinator. Maximising use of runway capacity may be constrained by airspace availability, terminal capacity, and aircraft stand availability. The assessment is then used by the airport co-ordinator when he comes to allocate take off and landing slots for the season.

Air Traffic

Mrs. Dunwoody: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what action he plans to take to protect the slots at present allocated to Regional Air Services in the South East from re-allocation to other services. [85836]

Ms Glenda Jackson: The EC regulation that governs the slot allocation process permits Member States to reserve slots for domestic scheduled services on two grounds:

> That the slots concerned were being used for a particular route at the time of entry into force of the Regulation (1993), only one air carrier is operating on the route, and no other mode of transport can provide an adequate service.
>
> or
>
> Where public service obligations have been imposed on a route (that is, a transport link between two cities or regions rather than an airport specific route).

No slots are currently protected on either ground. The Government said in *A New Deal for Transport* (Cmnd 3950) that they would press for recognition in any revision of the Regulation of the case for maintaining access from regional airports into major hubs such as Heathrow and Gatwick. Proposals for revision are still awaited from the Commission.

Mrs. Dunwoody: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what safeguards exist to ensure that airspace management by NATS of airports and air traffic, where NATS does not provide the services, is impartial. [85841]

Ms Glenda Jackson: The Directions to the CAA under section 72 of the Civil Aviation Act 1982 state that NATS must provide air navigation services

> "without according preferential treatment to either civil or military users ... ".

If an airport or user has a complaint about the management of airspace by NATS, it could refer to, for instance, the Directorate of Airspace Policy or the Economic Regulation Group, depending on the circumstances. If they were not happy with the outcome, they would have the right to appeal to the Chairman of the CAA.

The ability of NATS to unfairly influence access to airspace from airports is limited. The allocation of slots in NATS airspace for aircraft leaving airports is beyond NATS' control—in fact it is decided by the Central Flow Management Unit in Brussels. The only legitimate circumstances under which NATS could restrict access to airspace would be for reasons of safety.

Mrs. Dunwoody: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what has been the change in air traffic movements at *(a)* Heathrow, *(b)* Gatwick, *(c)* Stansted, *(d)* Glasgow, *(e)* Manchester and *(f)* Belfast airports in each of the last 10 years. [85871]

Ms Glenda Jackson: The most recent statistics published by the Civil Aviation Authority cover the period 1987 to 1997. The information requested is set out in the table.

Aircraft movements (Thousand)

	1987	*1988*	*1989*	*1990*	*1991*	*1992*	*1993*	*1994*	*1995*	*1996*	*1997*
Heathrow	330	352	368	390	382	406	411	425	435	440	441
Gatwick	189	199	205	203	174	186	185	192	203	222	239
Stansted	47	47	51	47	53	61	63	75	84	96	105
Glasgow	102	101	108	111	106	107	104	95	92	92	98
Manchester	126	147	155	155	154	157	160	170	170	164	168
Belfast City	23	28	29	29	38	33	38	40	43	41	38
Belfast International	80	83	96	97	95	97	92	88	98	93	95

Mrs. Dunwoody: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what discussions his Department has held with the British airlines holding slots at South-East airports about their re-allocation. [85837]

Ms Glenda Jackson: None. The current regulation permits slots to be freely exchanged between carriers, or transferred by a carrier from one route or type of service to another. But British airlines should be aware of the Government's view, as set out in A New Deal for Transport, that any revision of the EC Regulation that governs the slot allocation process at congested airports should recognise the case for maintaining access from regional airports into congested hubs such as Heathrow and Gatwick.

Mrs. Dunwoody: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will set out the Public Service Obligation rules to protect air services for those airports to which they apply. [85925]

Ms Glenda Jackson: The conditions under which a Public Service Obligation (PSO) can be established on an air route are set out in European Council Regulation 2408–92. The European Court of Justice found (Case T—260/94 Air Inter v The Commission) that a "route" should be defined as a transport link between two cities or regions, and is not airport specific.

A PSO on a regional service to London could therefore be fulfilled by services from any airport in the London airport system. A PSO may be imposed by a Member State in respect of scheduled air services to an airport serving a peripheral or development region in its territory, or on a thin route to any regional airport in its territory. The criterion is that the route must be vital to the economic development of the region in which the airport is situated. PSOs may be used to the extent necessary to ensure on a route the adequate provision of scheduled air services satisfying fixed standards of continuity, regularity, capacity and pricing, which standards air carriers would not assume if they were solely considering their commercial interest. There is provision for the carrier fulfilling the PSO to be reimbursed as appropriate for meeting the specified standards.

"Adequacy" is assessed with regard to: the public interest; the availability of other forms of transport; air fares and conditions; and the combined effect of all air carriers operating or intending to operate on the route.

Mrs. Dunwoody: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what were the *(a)* estimated and *(b)* actual aircraft movements at the three major south east airports for (i) 1996–97 and (ii) 1997–98. [85879]

Ms Glenda Jackson: The CAA produces forecasts for air transport movements in total UK airspace and for the London Air Traffic Control Centre (LATCC) for planning purposes, but does not break the figures down on an airport by airport basis. The LATCC figures which cover all airports in the London area are as follows:

	Estimated	*Actual*
1996–97	1,504,000	1,507,000
1997–98	1,618,000	1,609,000

NATS keep records of the number of actual movements that they handle at each airport. The figures are as follows:

	1996–97	*1997–98*
Heathrow	439,000	443,000
Gatwick	224,000	244,000
Stansted	98,000	106,000

Air Safety

Mrs. Dunwoody: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions (1) if he will list the occasions in the last five years where twin-engined transport aircraft have made single-engined approaches to Heathrow; [85846]

(2) if he will list the number of incidents in the last five years in which aircraft have flown over central London with one engine inoperative intending to land at Heathrow. [85886]

Ms Glenda Jackson: The Civil Aviation Authority has received 24 reports relating to transport aircraft approaching Heathrow airport with one engine inoperative in the last five years. Nine of these reports related to twin engined aircraft. It is not possible to determine which, if any, of these incidents involved flights over central London as approaches are also made from the west.

The dates on which the incident involving twin engined aircraft occurred, together with the aircraft types involved, are as follows:

Date	*Aircraft type*
22 September 1994	B757
25 January 1995	B737
1 November 1996	B737
24 November 1996	B737
5 July 1997	A310
26 August 1997	B757
15 May 1998	A321
9 July 1998	A300
20 January 1999	A310

Mrs. Dunwoody: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what assessment he has made of trends in the number of aircraft near-misses in the last year; and what action has been initiated to check the efficiency of the air traffic control system. [85847]

Ms Glenda Jackson: All reported airprox incidents are fully investigated by the independent UK Airprox Board (UKAB). In 1998, UKAB investigated 202 airprox incidents, a figure slightly lower than at any time in the past decade, despite significant increases in traffic over that period. Of these, only 7 were assessed as being risk-bearing and attributable to National Air Traffic Services (NATS). This is the lowest figure in the 1990s despite record traffic levels. However, there is no cause for complacency and Ministers and NATS continue to ensure that the highest priority is given to maintaining and, where practicable, improving on the UK's outstanding safety record.

Coastguard

Mrs. Dunwoody: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what provision HM Coastguard makes for the control of the operations room by experienced staff during meal breaks. [85839]

Ms Glenda Jackson: HM Coastguard Operational Instructions are clear that during a temporary absence of a watch manager, such as meal breaks, the watch manager is to ensure that a suitable officer is nominated and has assumed full responsibility for the Watch, and that an entry to this effect is made in the Operations Room Log.

Mrs. Dunwoody: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will list each occasion in the last 12 months on which untrained staff were substituted for trained Coastguard personnel. [85842]

Ms Glenda Jackson: On no occasions were untrained staff substituted for trained Coastguard personnel over the last 12 months.

Mrs. Dunwoody: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what consultation has taken place with the Coastguard at Dover Maritime Rescue Control Centre about the implementation of the mandatory reporting regime. [85881]

Ms Glenda Jackson: Mandatory reporting has been discussed at each 3 monthly meeting of the Channel Navigation Information Service (CNIS) Technical Working Group since September 1997. Coastguard Operations Room Staff representatives are present at all these meetings. In October 1997, a special meeting took place involving Regional, District, Operations Room and the, then Coastguard Agency (TCA) Technical Staff to discuss the implications and any necessary changes to current procedures. The last two Dover District Management Board Meetings have included mandatory reporting as the main agenda item. Two circulars on the subject have been issued to all staff who also have access to the International Maritime Organization (IMO) source documentation.

Mrs. Dunwoody: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions on how many occasions in the last six months the broadcast service for mariners in the Swansea area has been reduced. [85880]

Ms Glenda Jackson: There have been no occasions in the last six months when the broadcast service to mariners in the Swansea area has been reduced.

Mrs. Dunwoody: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what extra staff will be required by HM Coastguard to fulfil their additional duties to deal with weather forecasts and meteorological reports; and what talks have taken place on this subject with staff representatives. [85840]

Ms Glenda Jackson: HM Coastguard has recruited 40 additional Coastguard Watch Assistants (Operations) nationwide to supplement existing Co-ordination Centre watchkeeping complements to assist in the broadcast of Maritime Safety Information (MSI).

The Coastguard Trade Unions were notified of HM Coastguard's future responsibilities for MSI in October 1998, and this was followed by a first meeting in November 1998. Consultation took place in February 1999 with Operations Room staff and District Management teams regarding the operational procedures, radio coverage, frequencies and scheduling required for the broadcast of Maritime Safety Information by HM Coastguard. As part of this process, the Coastguard Trade Unions were also invited to comment. The Maritime Safety Information radio broadcast instructions provided to HM Coastguard Co-ordination Centres are a direct result of this consultation.

Mrs. Dunwoody: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will list the recommended staffing levels for the Maritime Rescue Sub Centre Co-ordinating stations at (i) Oban, (ii) Liverpool, (iii) Belfast and (iv) Stornoway for the period January to April 1999. [85843]

Ms Glenda Jackson: The recommended staffing levels at Oban, Liverpool, Belfast and Stornoway for the period January to April 1999 are as follows.

Oban—1 District Controller (DC), 1 Deputy District Controller (DDC), 4 Watch Managers (WMs), 5 Watch Officers (WOs), 7 Coastguard Watch Assistants (Operations) (CWA (O)), 1 Coastguard Watch Assistant (Admin) (CWA(A))

Liverpool—1 DC, 1 DDC, 4 WMs, 8 WOs, 8 CWA (O)s, 1CWA(A)

Belfast—1 DC, 1 DDC, 4 WMs, 9 WOs, 6 CWA (O)s, 1CWA(A)

Stornoway—1 DC, 1 DDC, 4 WMs, 5 WOs, 7 CWA(O)s, 1 CWA(A).

A full-time CWA post may be split between 2 part-time staff.

Domestic Air Routes

Mrs. Dunwoody: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions (1) what changes there have been in the published times for arrival and departure for domestic air routes in the last 12 months; [85927]

(2) what has been the change in scheduled journey time between *(a)* Heathrow, *(b)* Gatwick and *(c)* Stansted and (i) Glasgow, (ii) Manchester and (iii) Belfast International airports in each of the last 10 years. [85926]

Ms Glenda Jackson: The information requested in the first question is set out in the table. The data have been gathered from the Official Airline Guide. Due to the number of airports and different permutations of routes, the information requested in the second question could be supplied only at disproportionate cost.

Route	*Approximate scheduled journey time in 1999 (minutes)*	*Change over last 10 years*
Heathrow-Glasgow	75	Increase of approximately 2 minutes in 1999
Gatwick-Glasgow	85	Increase of approximately 2 minutes in 1998
Stansted-Glasgow	80	No change
Heathrow-Manchester	55	Increase of approximately 5 minutes in 1999
Gatwick-Manchester	65	Increase of approximately 5 minutes in 1999

Route	Approximate scheduled journey time in 1999 (minutes)	Change over last 10 years
Stansted-Manchester	60	No change
Heathrow-Belfast	75	No change
Gatwick-Belfast	No service	
Stansted-Belfast	No service	

Local Government Finance

Mr. Gardiner: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what principles and objectives underlie the review of standard spending assessments; and if he will make a statement. [85740]

Ms Armstrong: I refer my hon. Friend to the answer given to the hon. Member for Sutton and Cheam (Mr. Burstow) by the Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions, my hon. Friend the Member for Mansfield (Mr. Meale) on 24 May 1999, *Official Report*, column *8*.

British Rail Employees (Asbestosis)

Ms Kelly: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions, pursuant to his answer of 25 May 1999, *Official Report*, column *84*, on British Rail employees, what information is available from the British Railways Board on compensation payments since 1991 to former employees of British Rail who are diagnosed as having mesothelioma, asbestosis or primary carcinoma of the lungs related to exposure to asbestos. [85935]

Ms Glenda Jackson: I refer to my answers of 17 May 1999, *Official Report*, column *245* and 25 May 1999, *Official Report*, column *84*. I will ask the Secretary to the Board to write to my hon. Friend, to provide an opportunity for her to discuss any particular concerns she may have in this matter.

School Budgets

Mr. Kidney: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions, pursuant to his answer of 21 May 1999, *Official Report*, column *471*, on school budgets, if it is his objective in carrying out the present review of the formula for distributing central Government grant to local authorities to remove factors that cannot be justified by reference to actual cost and other objectively verifiable criteria. [85703]

Ms Armstrong: The objectives of the current review of revenue grant distribution are to investigate thoroughly whether there is a better way of determining the distribution of revenue support grant which is simpler, more stable, more robust and fairer than the present arrangements for SSAs. These objectives were set out in last year's White Paper, "Modern Local Government—In Touch with the People".

Environment Task Force

Judy Mallaber: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions when the Green Ministers' Committee *(a)* has discussed and *(b)* plans to discuss, the New Deal Environment Task Force. [86040]

Mr. Meacher: The Green Ministers Committee does consider policy areas of cross-cutting interest at its meetings, in addition to its main task of developing systems to integrate sustainable development and environmental concerns into Government policies and operations. We have not so far discussed the Task Force nor is it on the agenda for our next meeting in July. But we may wish to turn to it at a later date.

Judy Mallaber: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will introduce an Environment Task Force Charter Mark to be awarded to projects achieving environmental benefit to the community. [86072]

Mr. Caborn: Charter Mark is the Government's award scheme for encouraging and recognising excellence in public service. All public service organisations which serve the public direct, including public service organisations which deliver Environment Task Force placements, can apply for a Charter Mark. However, the environmental benefit of the projects is not a criteria for the award of Charter Marks.

Providers of Environment Task Force placements have also been able to apply for New Deal Awards which will soon be presented to employers and other organisations in recognition of the significant contribution they have made to the success of the New Deal.

Ex-service Personnel

Mr. Mullin: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what research his Department has assessed of the number of *(a)* homeless people and *(b)* prisoners who are former members of the armed forces. [85665]

Mr. Raynsford: The Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions does not routinely collect information on the number of homeless people who are former members of the armed forces. However, research on single homeless people and rough sleepers commissioned by the Department provides some information on the proportion of these groups which have a service background. *Single Homeless People (HMSO, 1993)* found that a fifth of a sample of single homeless people living in hostels or bed and breakfast hotels had been in the armed forces or merchant navy (not counting national service or the territorials). *From Street to Home: An Evaluation of Phase 2 of the Rough Sleepers Initiative (TSO, 1996)* found that a quarter of rough sleepers had been in the armed forces or merchant navy.

As part of the Social Exclusion Unit review of *Rough Sleeping* (Cm 4008) the Department reviewed key research on rough sleeping. The review covered a number of studies dealing with rough sleepers with service backgrounds, including the two DETR studies described above, plus research commissioned by voluntary sector organisations including *Falling Out: a research study of*

homeless ex-service people, Randall & Brown (Crisis, 1994), and *Homeless on Civvy Street, Gunner and Knott (Ex-Service Action Group, 1997).* All these studies show that between a quarter and a fifth of rough sleepers have been in the armed forces at some stage.

As for data on prisoners, the information requested is not available. No information regarding an individual's professional status, prior to reception into a Prison Service establishment, is recorded centrally.

Parish and Town Councils

Mr. Laurence Robertson: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what powers he has to monitor the composition of parish and town councils; and if he will make a statement. [85547]

Ms Armstrong: The Secretary of State has no powers to monitor the composition of parish and town councils.

Concessionary Fares (Children)

Mr. Laurence Robertson: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what plans he has to exempt children who are in full time education from paying full fares on bus and train services; and if he will make a statement. [85548]

Ms Glenda Jackson: Transport operators may offer discounted travel for young people commercially if they wish to do so. Local authorities may also provide discounted travel for young people up to the age of 18 who are in full-time education. It is for individual local authorities to decide whether to do so, what the size of any discount should be, and whether it should apply to train as well as bus travel. In addition, it is for Local Education Authorities to decide whether a child qualifies for free or assisted travel to school.

Provision of reduced fares varies, and my Department is currently undertaking a survey of local authorities and operators. The results will be available to the School Travel Advisory Group, which comprises representatives of the relevant Government Departments and of parents, teachers, local authorities and other interested parties, so that the Group can identify and promulgate best practice.

National Minimum Wage

Mr. Rowlands: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions how many people in his Department and its associated bodies and agencies have benefited from the introduction of a national minimum wage. [86086]

Ms Glenda Jackson: All staff in DETR(C), its associated bodies and agencies were already paid above the national minimum wage on its introduction on 1 April 1999.

Heathrow Airport (Terminal 5)

Mr. Sheerman: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what has been the cost to his Department of the inquiry into the Heathrow Fifth Terminal; and what is the estimated cost to his Department of the Inspector's preparation of his report. [86041]

Mr. Caborn: The cost of the Heathrow Terminal 5 Inquiry to the Department was approximately £6 million. In addition, the Department's agencies (Planning Inspectorate, Highways Agency and Royal Parks Agency) spent a further £5 million collectively on inquiry costs. It is estimated that the preparation of the Inspector's report could cost the Department and Planning Inspectorate combined up to £1 million.

Fishing Vessels (Safety Equipment)

Mr. Steen: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will commission an assessment of the (i) cost and (ii) risk effectiveness of the safety equipment currently required to be carried by fishing vessels. [85855]

Ms Glenda Jackson: The Fishing Vessel (Safety Provisions) Rules 1975 specified the carriage requirements for safety equipment on all UK registered fishing vessels. Since then, changes to those requirements have been developed within the context of the Fishing Industry Safety Group (FISG), in which representatives of the fishing industry have themselves influenced the standards being required. For smaller vessels (under 12 metres in length) we hope soon to introduce a new Code of Practice. This Code will specify safety equipment which should be carried. The list of safety equipment to be carried results from consultation with the industry and the benefits of each item have already been fully considered. A special assessment of cost and risk effectiveness of safety equipment is not necessary as requirements are kept under continuous review by the Maritime and Coastguard Agency and the industry through the mechanism of the FISG.

Telecommunications Masts

Mr. Swayne: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what representations he has received regarding the location of telecommunication masts and the issuing of interim planning guidance pending publication of the findings of the National Radiological Protection Board into the non-thermal effects of microwave radiation; and if he will make a statement. [85931]

Mr. Raynsford: Draft guidance on land use planning and electromagnetic fields (EMFs) was issued for consultation by my Department in conjunction with the Department of Health on 8 December 1998. Copies were placed in the Library. We have received 147 responses to the consultation draft. Since issuing the draft circular, my Department has received four Parliamentary Questions and some 70 letters related to the possible health effects of telecommunications apparatus.

The draft guidance reflects the advice to Government of the National Radiological Protection Board (NRPB) that there is no convincing evidence of a causal link between exposure to EMFs and cancer. The Board's advice is based upon a review and assessment of published scientific studies covering the fields of epidemiology, biology and dosimetry. In continuing to review the science, the NRPB takes into account the range of reported biological effects, including those of a non-thermal nature. We shall continue to take NRPB advice into consideration in developing policy on land use planning and electromagnetic fields.

Holiday Lets

Mr. Tyler: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will take steps to prevent properties bought under the right to buy legislation from being let to holidaymakers for extended periods on a commercial basis; and if he will make a statement. [85895]

Mr. Raynsford: We are not aware of a widespread problem though we shall consider any proposals that may be put to us by the local authority involved. Meanwhile it could be premature and prejudicial to comment on an issue that is likely to go back before the courts.

Walton Bridge

Mr. Wilshire: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions on what date he was formally asked by Surrey County Council if he planned to call in their planning application for a temporary replacement for the existing Walton Bridge across the Thames; and when he expects to take a decision. [85903]

Mr. Raynsford: Surrey County Council referred the planning application to the Government Office for the South East in March 1999. We expect to issue a decision shortly.

Mr. Wilshire: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what central Government grant will be made available for the construction of a temporary replacement to the existing Walton Bridge across the Thames; and when he expects it to be released to Surrey County Council. [85902]

Mr. Raynsford: In the local transport capital expenditure settlement announced in December last year, Surrey County Council was allocated £2,602,000 for bridge strengthening in 1999–2000. The allocation included £1,590,000 for the A244 Thames Crossing at Walton.

Half of this allocation will be paid as Transport Supplementary Grant and will be released to the County Council in four equal quarterly instalments during the financial year. The remaining resources have been allocated as Annual Capital Guideline.

CULTURE, MEDIA AND SPORT

Museums

Mr. Peter Ainsworth: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport if he intends to transfer responsibility for any of his Department's sponsored museums to the Greater London Authority. [80236]

Mr. Chris Smith *[holding answer 13 April 1999]:* The Greater London Authority Bill, currently before Parliament, does not provide for the transfer of responsibility for any of the museums and galleries which are sponsored by my Department. However, it is my intention to transfer to the Greater London Authority the responsibility for making some appointments to the Boards of museums which were previously funded by the Greater London Council. I am considering with colleagues the extent to which the Greater London Authority might be given further responsibilities in respect of museums and galleries in order to enhance the cultural role for the Authority.

Works of Art (Nazi Period)

Dr. Tony Wright: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport (1) what plans he has *(a)* to put a time limit on claims in respect of works of art of dubious provenance from the Nazi period and *(b)* to seek amendment of the law governing de-accessioning of museum holdings; [85241]

(2) how many works of art of dubious provenance from the Nazi period have so far been identified in British museums; when further inventories of such items will be published; and what plans he has to publicise these inventories; [85244]

(3) how many museums are undertaking inventories of works of art in their possession of dubious provenance from the Nazi period; and what plans he has to increase the number of museums involved in the inventory process; [85243]

(4) what is his policy on works of art in British museums that are of dubious provenance from the Nazi period. [85242]

Mr. Alan Howarth: The Government have asked members of the National Museum Directors' Conference to examine their collections with a view to finding out whether any items may have been looted during World War II and the Nazi period. Any claims will need to be considered on their merits on a case-by-case basis.

Some works have been identified which have gaps in their provenance, but this does not necessarily mean that they are the result of spoliation during the Holocaust and World War II. Research is continuing and it is hoped that updated information about the progress of this research will be published later this year.

The National Museum Directors' Conference has published Action Plans for 23 national museums, galleries and libraries, and I have deposited a copy of these in the Library. The Museums and Galleries Commission has recently issued a Statement of Principles to all Registered Museums. This recommends action to be taken by non-national institutions. The Museums and Galleries Commission will also be having discussions with those non-national institutions which have major art collections about how they might approach the issue of research into provenance. I have deposited a copy of this Statement of Principles in the Library.

The possibility of a time limit on claims is an issue which will need to be discussed with museums and galleries and other interests. However, the Statement of Principles published by the National Museums Directors' Conference last November suggests that an institution which has fully publicised the details of a work which it believes might have been the result of spoliation during the Nazi period and World War II would normally expect to receive a claim within six years. I have deposited a copy of this Statement of Principles in the Library. The question of de-accessioning will be considered on a case by case basis if, and when, there are successful claims for objects to be returned.

Public Libraries (Funding)

Jackie Ballard: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport if he will list the local authorities which have applied for funding from *(a)* the Capital Modernisation Fund for IT facilities in public libraries and *(b)* the National Lottery Opportunity Fund for funding for libraries, in each case since its introduction; and what sums were awarded. [85315]

Mr. Alan Howarth: The detailed criteria for these programmes have still to be finalised, so no library authorities have yet been invited to bid.

Museums, Libraries and Archives Council

Ms Perham: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport when his Department will publish the report of the Museums, Libraries and Archives Council Design Group; and if he will make a statement about his plans for implementing the recommendations in the report. [86305]

Mr. Chris Smith: My Department is today placing copies of the report in the Libraries of both Houses. A copy is also being made accessible on my Department's website, www.culture.gov.uk. The Department would be pleased to receive any views from interested parties about the report, as it takes forward the process of establishing the Museums, Libraries and Archives Council by 1 April 2000. There are a number of issues arising from the report which affect the libraries, museums and archives communities and which my Department will be discussing with bodies representing those communities over the coming months. To start this process, I have written to the National Museum Directors' Conference to invite them to propose ways in which the national museums and galleries, and the British Library, can assist the new body in its work.

Detailed decisions about the role and priorities of the Museums, Libraries and Archives Council will be made by the Chair and other board members once they have been appointed later this year.

BBC

Mr. Fallon: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport (1) if he will make a statement on his responsibilities in relation to the funding of the BBC's commercial activities; [85507]

(2) if he will list the arrangements under which the BBC is accountable to his Department for its commercial activities. [85346]

Janet Anderson: The BBC Charter and Agreement provide a framework for ensuring that the Corporation's commercial activities are funded, operated and accounted for separately from its public service activities. It is for the BBC's Board of Governors to ensure that the BBC meets its obligations in this area. Any commercial activities undertaken by the BBC are subject to the same UK and EU competition law as its competitors. The BBC publishes separate annual reports and accounts for its commercial subsidiaries BBC Worldwide Ltd. and BBC Resources Ltd. These are submitted to the Secretary of State and presented to Parliament.

The Secretary of State's approval is required before the BBC can provide new commercial services itself or enter into joint ventures with commercial partners to provide new services.

Mr. Fallon: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport, pursuant to his answer of 25 May 1999, *Official Report*, column *142*, on the BBC, if he will place in the Library a copy of his Department's rules governing borrowing by the BBC and its commercial subsidiaries. [85892]

Janet Anderson: Article 3(w) of the BBC's Royal Charter governs borrowing. As in all other aspects of the BBC's remit, its commercial activities are subject to the Royal Charter and Agreement. This is available in the Library of the House.

Museum of London

Mr. Peter Ainsworth: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport what plans he has for the future funding of the Museum of London. [86081]

Mr. Chris Smith: In common with all DCMS sponsored museums and galleries, the Museum has a funding agreement with my Department for the financial years up to and including 2001–02. Funding decisions beyond then have yet to be taken.

Millennium Dome

Mr. Peter Ainsworth: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport (1) what plans he has to make books of poetry, drama, the visual arts, architecture, history, biography and fiction available for purchase in the Dome; [86082]

(2) what plans he has to make recorded music available for purchase in the Dome; [86079]

(3) what plans he has to make copies of *(a)* the Bible and *(b)* multi-faith religious books available for purchase in the Dome. [86078]

Janet Anderson: As part of the New Millennium Experience Company's (NMEC) own retailing arrangements at the Millennium Dome, a range of books and other printed material relevant to the millennium and the Millennium Experience will be on sale. The company's general policy is not to replicate, or compete with, the retailing opportunities which people enjoy in their high streets and local town centres. The company's policy on recorded music reflects the same principles.

Birth Certificates

Mr. Cann: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport if he will list those purposes for which his Department and its executive agencies require a birth certificate to be provided by *(a)* employees, *(b)* contractors, *(c)* those applying for employment and contracts and *(d)* other persons. [85686]

Mr. Chris Smith: In line with general practice elsewhere in Government, members of staff recruited by DCMS are routinely asked to provide proof of identity prior to taking up appointment with the Department. Birth certificates, passports, and a range of other documents are acceptable for this purpose. It is not mandatory for staff to provide a copy of their birth certificate. Contractors

are expected to undertake satisfactory checks on proof of identity of their staff before they take up work with the Department.

Television News

Mr. Kaufman: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport if he will instruct the ITC to obtain from ITV the latest figures showing (i) the change in the numbers watching news on Channel 3 since the abolition of News at 10 and (ii) the change in the viewing numbers for the 10.00 to 10.30 pm weekday slot on Channel 3 since the abolition of News at 10. [85775]

Janet Anderson: ITV began their new evening schedule on 8 March, replacing the bulletin at 5.40 pm to 6.00 pm and News at Ten with a half hour news bulletin from 6.30 pm to 7.00 pm and an update from 11 pm to 11.15 pm. For the four weeks beginning 27 April, the latest figures available to the ITC, the average audiences who were watching news on Channel 3 and the figures for the equivalent weeks in 1999 are as follows:

(i)

	Million
1998	
5.40 pm to 6.00 pm	4.1
10.00 pm to 10.30 pm	5.5
Total	9.6
1999	
6.30 pm to 7.00 pm	5.4
11.00 pm to 11.15 pm	3.6
Total	9.0

(ii) During this period in 1998, 5.5 million were watching Channel 3 in the 10.00 pm to 10.30 pm slot and during the same period in 1999, since the rescheduling of News at Ten, this has changed to 6.0 million.

TRADE AND INDUSTRY

World Science Congress

Dr. Gibson: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what plans he has made for a British delegation to the World Science Congress in Budapest. [85305]

Mr. Battle: The exact composition of the UK delegation will be determined soon. It is likely to comprise representatives from the Office of Science and Technology, the Department for International Development, the United Kingdom's Permanent Delegation to UNESCO and the Parliamentary Office of Science and Technology. It is hoped that other non-governmental organisations will also be represented.

The Government's Chief Scientific Adviser, Sir Robert May, is giving one of the main presentations during the first, scientific, section of the Conference, and my hon. Friend the Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for International Development will make a statement on behalf of the Government during the plenary debate in the final section of the Conference.

Millennium Compliance (Energy)

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry if he will make a statement on the proceedings of the Energy Council of 11 May relating to the millennium bug in the energy sector; what documents were discussed; and what contribution he made to the debate. [85522]

Mr. Battle: For a general report on the Energy Council, I refer the hon. Member to the answer I gave to my hon. Friend the Member for Leicester, South (Mr. Marshall) on 17 May 1999, *Official Report*, columns *253–54*. For the item on the millennium bug, the Council took note of an oral presentation by the Commission. The Commission reported on the recent outcome of the Telecommunications Council in respect of the millennium bug and on progress being made in the energy sector, addressing, in particular, the supply of electricity, natural gas, oil and coal, as well as questions relating to nuclear safety. The Council asked to be kept informed of progress.

Sellafield

Mr. Collins: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry when he was first informed of negotiations between British Nuclear Fuels plc and Maine Yankee Atomic Power on the reprocessing of spent nuclear fuel at Sellafield; and if he will make a statement. [85461]

Mr. Battle *[holding answer 26 May 1999]:* I understand that BNFL was one of the nuclear fuel services companies approached by the owners of the Maine Yankee reactor in New England, USA, about options for removing spent nuclear fuel from the now closed reactor. In the course of these informal discussions which took place during 1998, it became clear that it would not be possible for BNFL and Maine Yankee to conclude a contract which would be consistent with both UK Government policy on the importation of radioactive waste and US Government policy on reprocessing. The discussions were, therefore, brought to an end and this Department was so informed.

Strategic Export Controls

Ms Jenny Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry when he expects to announce the outcome of the consultation exercise on strategic export controls. [85538]

Dr. Howells: As announced in reply to a question from my hon. Friend the Member for Harrow, West (Mr. Thomas) on 30 November 1999, *Official Report*, column *55*, the responses to the consultation exercise on strategic export controls were, with the exception of two for which complete confidentiality was requested, placed in the Libraries of both Houses and in the Library of the Department. Copies of the responses are also available on request from the Department's Export Control Organisation. The Government are currently reviewing the proposals contained in the White Paper in the light of responses received and are committed to introducing legislation as soon as time is available in the legislative programme.

Post Office

Mr. Boswell: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what the criteria are for approval of capital purchases overseas by the Post Office. [86047]

Mr. Ian McCartney: As was announced by my right hon. Friend, the former Secretary of State for Trade and Industry, to this House in the statement on the future of the Post Office on 7 December 1998, *Official Report*, columns 21–24, the Government will approve normal Post Office requests for borrowing for investment cases that are commercially robust. Separate fast-track arrangements will be put in place for considering the largest strategic investments. Further details will be set out in our forthcoming White Paper on the future of the Post Office.

Electricity Trading Arrangements

Mr. Boswell: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry when he now expects to conclude the Review of Electricity Trading Arrangements. [86045]

Mr. Battle: I refer the hon. Member to the answer I gave to my hon. Friend the Member for Peterborough (Mrs. Brinton) on 18 May 1999, *Official Report*, column *300*.

Imports (Forced Labour)

Ann Clwyd: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what advice is available from his Department to individuals and companies who wish to avoid importing goods made with the use of forced labour or child labour. [85829]

Mr. Wilson: The Government strongly support a proposed new ILO Convention to eliminate the worst forms of child labour, and funding programmes such as the ILO International Programme on the Elimination of Child-Labour (IPEC). Individuals or companies are advised to seek assurances on the matter from their retailers or suppliers. The Government strongly support recent initiatives by the private and voluntary sector to develop or promote codes of conduct in this area; and an increasing number of UK companies are entering into such arrangements with their overseas suppliers.

Exports (Indonesia)

Ann Clwyd: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry, pursuant to his answer of 6 May 1999, *Official Report*, column *450*, concerning ECGD liabilities in respect of exports in Indonesia if he will list (i) the unrecovered claims, (ii) the proportion of the unrecovered claims which relates to military exports and (iii) the unrecovered claims which ECGD expects to be written off. [85848]

Mr. Wilson: (i) Details of the unrecovered claims arising in contracts involving exports to Indonesia are classified as "commercial in confidence" and cannot, therefore, be disclosed by ECGD without the consent of the individual exporters concerned.

(ii) The proportion of the unrecovered claims of £48 million which related to military exports was 52 per cent. (value £25 million).

(iii) ECGD expects that no unrecovered claims will be written off. It is expected that a full recovery will be made under the provisions of a bilateral rescheduling currently being negotiated between the UK and Indonesia. This bilateral debt agreement is intended to cover debt in relation to both civil and military contracts signed prior to 1 July 1997, and the debt to be restructured over the period to 31 March 2000 amounts to some £240 million.

Raw Milk

Mrs. Dean: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry when he plans to respond to the report of the Monopolies and Mergers Commission on the selling of raw milk. [86025]

Dr. Howells: I refer my hon. Friend to my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry's answer to the hon. Member for Somerton and Frome (Mr. Heath), on 6 May 1999, *Official Report*, column 1069.

BBC Commercial Policy

Mr. Fallon: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what discussions his officials have had with the BBC on its commercial policy guidelines; and if the guidelines were subject to prior approval by *(a)* his Department and *(b)* the Office of Fair Trading. [85893]

Dr. Howells: DTI officials have not had discussions with the BBC on its commercial policy guidelines, which were not subject to prior approval either by the Department or by the Office of Fair Trading.

National Minimum Wage

Mr. Rowlands: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry how many people in his Department and its associated bodies and agencies have benefited from the introduction of a national minimum wage. [86088]

Mr. Ian McCartney: The lowest rate of pay for any staff in the Department increased from £7,785 to £7,900 per annum with effect from 1 April 1999. 170 staff benefited from this increase.

Arms Exports (Indonesia)

Mr. Hancock: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what system has been established for the end-use monitoring of military equipment sold to the Government of Indonesia in the last five years. [85970]

Mr. Hoon: I have been asked to reply.

No formal mechanisms exist at present for systematically monitoring the use of British defence equipment once it has been exported. We have made clear to the Indonesian authorities that British-supplied equipment should not be used against civilians to prevent the exercise of their rights of free expression, assembly and association, or in violation of other international human rights standards.

INTERNATIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Genetically Modified Crops

Joan Ruddock: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development, pursuant to her answer of 15 February 1999, *Official Report*, column *424*, on genetically modified crops, if she will make a statement on the progress of the research on the potential impact on farmers in developing countries of the increased use of genetically modified crops. [85489]

Clare Short: Later this year we will publish a progress report on our natural resources knowledge activities, including details of those studies which address genetic modification issues of concern and interest to developing countries. The three-year research project on the potential risks of introducing transgenic plants into traditional cropping systems, referred to in my earlier answer, began in April 1999. Results are not yet available. A short, predictive study of the potential effects on the livelihoods of poor people in developing countries of so-called "terminator" gene technologies is to be commissioned shortly for completion by the end of this year.

Overseas Debt

Mr. Kaufman: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development if she will list the sums of debt owed to the United Kingdom by each developing country. [85525]

Clare Short: The figures below show the amounts owed by governments of developing countries to the Department for International Development and to the Export Credits Guarantee Department.

We have cancelled the aid debts of the poorest countries to the value of £1.2 billion since 1978. Under the Commonwealth Debt Initiative announced in 1997, we have agreed to cancel the aid debts of the remaining Commonwealth countries which are committed to eradicating poverty and achieving the international development goals, which have transparent and accountable government, and which are bearing down on corruption.

In the Paris Club, the UK has played a full role. We have provided £1.3 billion of debt relief since 1989 on official export credit debt.

Outstanding debt to the UK

£ million

Country	*Outstanding aid loans* [1]	*Official export credit debt* [2]
Algeria	—	164.6
Angola	—	106.0
Antigua & Barbuda	1.60	1.60
Argentina	—	55.60
Belize	11.9	—
Benin	—	2.70
Bolivia	—	11.50
Bosnia	—	3.00
Brazil	1.97	523.70
Bulgaria	—	11.90
Burkina Faso	—	1.00
Cameroon	—	69.90
Cayman Islands	0.17	—
Central African Republic	—	0.30
Colombia	0.15	0.30
Congo	—	139.50
Costa Rica	0.76	—
Cote d'Ivoire	—	22.30
Croatia	—	78.00
Cuba	—	78.70
Cyprus	0.12	—
DR Congo	—	138.90
Ecuador	11.50	56.40
Egypt	—	183.70
Ethiopia	—	11.70
Gabon	—	133.10
Ghana	—	2.10
Guinea Republic	—	5.20
Guyana	—	43.90
India	2.40	—
Indonesia	—	42.10
Jamaica	29.10	2.60
Jordan	—	342.50
Kenya	—	36.70
Liberia	0.08	14.60
Macedonia	—	4.50
Madagascar	—	27.20
Malawi	—	0.70
Malaysia	2.80	—
Mali	—	4.10
Mauritania	—	6.80
Mexico	—	65.50
Morocco	—	53.10
Mozambique	—	89.90
Nicaragua	—	1.00
Niger	—	10.90
Nigeria	4.93	3,496.30
Paraguay	1.87	—
Peru	—	154.70
Philippines	2.77	23.80
Poland	—	898.90
Russia	—	631.90
Senegal	—	1.50
Seychelles	8.60	—
Sierra Leone	—	3.60
Somali Republic	—	27.40
St. Kitts	2.30	—
St. Vincent	3.28	—
Sudan	—	330.50
Swaziland	1.53	—
Tanzania	—	113.10
Togo	—	13.70
Turkey	22.70	—
Uganda	—	5.60
Vietnam	—	10.40
Yemen	—	3.10
Zambia	—	237.20
Zimbabwe	10.90	—
Total	121.43	8,499.20

[1] As of May 1999
[2] As of March 1999

Kashmir

Ann Clwyd: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development what aid has been provided to Kashmir by her Department since 1997. [85828]

Clare Short: Since 1997, we have provided £650,000 to the International Committee of the Red Cross for their humanitarian assistance programme in Jammu and Kashmir and £132,500 to the Save the Children Fund to support their work there. In addition, about £19,000 has been provided under the Small Grants Scheme to help equip a maternity hospital in Anantnag.

Chinese Western Poverty Reduction

Mr. Mullin: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development what position Her Majesty's Government have taken on the proposal that the World Bank should fund the Chinese Western Poverty Reduction Project; and if she will make a statement. [85664]

Clare Short: The World Bank's staff appraisal report on this project became available at the end of last week and has just been received in London. It is now being studied. I will write to my hon. Friend when an assessment has been made of the merits of the proposal.

National Minimum Wage

Mr. Rowlands: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development how many people in his Department and its associated bodies and agencies have benefited from the introduction of a national minimum wage. [86094]

Clare Short: None of the staff in my Department have been affected by the introduction of a national minimum wage. The current rates for our lowest paid staff in the UK are as follows:

Grade	*Rate per hour* £
C2 Grade (National rate)	3.72
C2 Grade (London rate)	4.96
Cleaner (London rate)	4.35

Technical Co-operation

Mr. Streeter: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development if she will list the 20 United Kingdom companies which have received *(a)* the largest number of technical co-operation consultancy contracts and *(b)* the highest value technical co-operation consultancy contracts with her Department in the last financial year. [85965]

Clare Short: The tables list details of contracts let in the UK by DFID for 1998–99, namely:

(a) the 20 companies which have been awarded the largest number of technical co-operation contracts.

Company	*Number of contracts*
The British Council	78
Natural Resources International Ltd.	48
Health and Life Sciences Partnership	46
Options Consultancy Services	43
International Family Health	34
Institute for Health Sector Development	33
International Institute for Environmental Development	25
Oxford Policy Management	25
Bannock Consulting	24
Overseas Development Institute	23
London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine	22
Centre for Development Studies	21
Crown Agents	20
Office for National Statistics	19
Empower	18
PricewaterhouseCoopers	15
Wolverhampton Polytraining Ltd.	15
Institute of Development Studies	14
KPMG	14
HR Wallingford	12

(b) the 20 highest value consultancy contracts awarded to companies.

£

Company	*Value*
Population Services International	11,021,782
Hunting Technical Services Ltd.	9,000,000
Joint Education Trust/Crown Agents/Independent Training and Education Centre	7,281,036
The British Council	7,281,036
The British Council	5,446,527
Arthur Anderson	4,996,560
Maxwell Stamp PLC	3,968,933
The British Council	3,385,276
Hunting Technical Services Ltd.	3,322,325
Helm Corporation	2,905,676
National Economic Research Associates	2,747,985
The British Council	2,622,497
Crown Agents	2,500,000
The British Council	2,433,080
LTS International	2,380,948
University of Birmingham	2,307,824
Institute for Health Sector Development Ltd.	2,226,330
Hunting Technical Services Ltd.	2,051,903
BBC Marshall Plan of the Mind Trust (BBC MPM Ltd.)	2,028,529
The British Council	1,946,400

Bilateral Aid

Mr. Streeter: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development what proportion of United Kingdom bilateral aid is provided to developing countries in the form of UK-sourced goods, services and contracts. [85966]

Clare Short: We notified the DAC of the OECD of the status (tied or untied) of all of our o.d.a., excluding technical cooperation and administrative costs. In 1997, 28 per cent. of such commitments were tied. In the same year, we awarded technical cooperation, management, and consultancy contracts in the UK totalling £241 million, mostly to UK companies. Contracts for goods totalling £14.5 million, were again mostly from the UK. awarded by our procurement agents.

Aid Programme

Mr. Streeter: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development what action her Department is taking to build up private sector capacities in poor countries through the aid programme. [85967]

Clare Short: As our White Paper makes clear, a thriving private sector is essential for sustainable and equitable economic growth. Since 1997, we have strengthened our collaboration with business to tackle the constraints faced by the private sector. We seek to promote a stable and attractive operating environment for business, both domestic and foreign. We seek, often through work with business intermediary organisations, to improve the capacity of local companies by improving access to sustainable financial services, training, market information and appropriate technology. And by bringing forward the Commonwealth Development Corporation Bill, we seek to enable CDC to mobilise higher levels of investment, which will help create and develop viable long term businesses in the poorer countries.

Mr. Streeter: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development what discussions she has had with representatives of the business community on untying British aid in the past six months. [85968]

Clare Short: I have discussed the issue informally with various representatives of the business community. We have also nominated representatives from the British Consultants Bureau, Crown Agents and Mott Macdonald to take part in the international discussions on aid untying at the Development Partners Forum, organised by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development's Development Assistance Committee in December 1998.

PRIME MINISTER

Pupil/Teacher Ratios

Fiona Mactaggart: To ask the Prime Minister if he will make a statement regarding the overall pupil/teacher ratio in maintained schools in England. [86113]

The Prime Minister: The overall pupil/teacher ratio in maintained schools in England fell from 18.9 to 18.8 between January 1998 and January 1999. Over the same period, the ratio in primary schools changed from 23.7 to 23.5 and that in secondary schools from 16.9 to 17.0. As a result of our policy to reduce the size of infant classes, the number of children in large infant classes fell by some 130,000 from 485,000 in January 1998 to 356,000 in January 1999.

AGRICULTURE, FISHERIES AND FOOD

Genetically Modified Seeds

Mr. Baker: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food if he will list each application for national seed listing of genetically modified varieties, indicating the (i) application number, (ii) company name, (iii) approximate date of proposed decision, (iv) release consent number, (v) date consent was granted and (vi) if different from the national list applicants, the applicants' names. [85934]

Mr. Rooker: The information is given in the table.

Genetically modified plant varieties
National list applications under consideration at 4 June 1999

Application number and species	*NL applicant*	*Earliest date of proposed decision*	*DETR release consent/marketing consent reference (and holder if different from NL applicant) and date granted*
35/959—Spring Oilseed Rape	Plant Genetic Systems, Belgium	Test and Trials Complete[1]	1996–95/R15/15—Application 20/11/95 Granted 3/1/96 1997—Marketing Consent—94/M1/1 Granted 28/2/96
35/960—Spring Oilseed Rape	Plant Genetic Systems, Belgium	Test and Trials Complete[1]	1996–95/R15/15—Application 20/11/95 Granted 3/1/96 1997—Marketing Consent—94/M1/1 Granted 28/2/96
35/1174—Winter Oilseed Rape	Plant Genetic Systems, Belgium	November 1999[2]	1997–97/R15/20—Application 9/6/97 Granted 1/8/97 1998–98/R15/24—Application 16/2/98 Granted 10/7/98
35/1175—Winter Oilseed Rape	Plant Genetic Systems, Belgium	November 1999[2]	1997–97/R15/20—Application 9/6/97 Granted 1/8/97 1998–98/R15/24—Application 16/2/98 Granted 10/7/98
35/1184—Winter Oilseed Rape	Monsanto Crop Protection, UK	November 1999[2]	96/R22/6—Application 20/6/96 Granted 6/8/96
35/1185—Winter Oilseed Rape	Monsanto Crop Protection, UK	November 1999[2]	96/R22/6—Application 20/6/96 Granted 6/8/96
35/1210—Spring Oilseed Rape	Plant Genetic Systems, Belgium	November 1999[2]	1998–97/R15/23—Application 8/12/97 Granted 19–3-98 1999–98/R19/18—Application 4/12/98 Granted 22/3/99 (Agrevo)
35/1211—Spring Oilseed Rape	Plant Genetic Systems, Belgium	November 1999[2]	1998–97/R15–23—Application 8/12/97 Granted 19/3/98 1999–98/R19/18—Application 4/12/98 Granted 22/3/98 (Agrevo)
35/1222—Spring Oilseed Rape	Pioneer Hi-Bred International Inc., USA	November 1999[2]	97/R24/2—Application 5/1/98 Granted 1/4/98

Genetically modified plant varieties
National list applications under consideration at 4 June 1999

Application number and species	*NL applicant*	*Earliest date of proposed decision*	*DETR release consent/marketing consent reference (and holder if different from NL applicant) and date granted*
35/1316—Winter Oilseed Rape	Plant Genetic Systems, Belgium	November 2000[2]	98/R15/24—Application 16/2/98 Granted 10/7/98
35/1318—Winter Oilseed Rape	Plant Genetic Systems, Belgium	November 2000[2]	98/R15/24—Application 16/2/98 Granted 10/7/98
35/1335—Spring Oilseed Rape	Advanta Seeds UK	November 2000[2]	97/R13/7—Application 31/7/97 Granted 13/3/97
35/1336—Spring Oilseed Rape	Advanta Seeds UK	November 2000[2]	97/R13/7—Application 31/1/97 Granted 13/3/97
35/1343—Spring Oilseed Rape	Pioneer Hi-Bred International Inc., USA	November 2000[2]	97/R24/2—Application 5/1/98 Granted 1/4/98
35/1346—Spring Oilseed Rape	Plant Genetic Systems, Belgium	November 2000[2]	98/R19/18—Application 4/12/98 Granted 22/3/99 (Agrevo)
35/1347—Spring Oilseed Rape	Plant Genetics Systems Belgium	November 2000[2]	98/R19/18—Application 4/12/98 Granted 22/3/99 (Agrevo)
45/774—Sugar Beet	Novartis Seeds AB, Sweden	Test and Trials Complete[1]	96/R21/4—Application 24/12/96 Granted 5/2/97
45/798—Sugar Beet	KWS Kleinwanzlebener Saatzucht AG, Germany	April 2000[2]	97/R19/13—Application 20/1/97 Granted 17/3/97 (Agrevo)
45/813—Sugar Beet	Danisco Seeds, UK	April 2000[2]	96/R21/4—Application 24/12/96 Granted 5/2/97 (Novartis)
45/850—Sugar Beet	KWS Kleinwanzlebener Saatzucht AG, Germany	April 2001[2]	97/R19/13—Application 20/1/97 Granted 17/3/97 (Agrevo)
45/865—Sugar Beet	Novartis Seeds AB, Sweden	April 2001[2]	96/R21/4—Application 24/12/96 Granted 25/2/97
45/877—Sugar Beet	Danisco Seeds, UK	April 2001[2]	96/R21/4—Application 24/12/96 Granted 25/2/97 (Novartis)
51/833—Maize	Van Der Have, Netherlands	February 2000[3]	96/R13/6—Application 23/2/96 Granted 2/4/96 (Sharpes) Marketing Consent C/F/95/12/07 Published 5/8/98
51/886—Maize	Van Der Have, Netherlands	February 2001[3]	Marketing Consent C/F/95/12/07 Published 5/8/98
132/533—Fodder Beet	DLF Trifolium, Denmark	Test and Trials not started	No National List tests or trials will be sown in 1999

[1] Test and trials complete, awaiting promulgation of marketing consents under Directive 90/220.
[2] Subject to promulgation of marketing consents under 90/220 and satisfactory completion of tests and trials.
[3] Subject to satisfactory completion of tests and trials.

Mr. Baker: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food how many test sites there have been in each relevant year for each of the national list applications of genetically modified seed varieties. [85946]

Mr. Rooker: The information is given in the table.

The number of national list test and trial sites planted each year for genetically modified varieties currently under consideration is as follows:

Species—Test/trial	*Number of sites*
Winter Oilseed Rape	
VCU trial sites	7
DUS test sites	1
pathology test sites (VCU)	2
vernalisation test sites	1
Spring Oilseed Rape	
VCU trial sites	2
DUS test sites	1
vernalisation test sites	1
Maize	
VCU trial sites	4
Reserve VCU trial sites	[1]2
DUS test sites	[2]—
Sugar Beet	
VCU/DUS sites	4
Reserve VCU/DUS sites	2

[1] 2 sites sown in 1999, none in 1998
[2] Conducted in France

Grey Squirrels

Mr. Soames: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food if he will re-instate the bounty for grey squirrel tails. [85772]

Mr. Morley: No. We are taking several steps to help landowners protect woodland from the damage caused by grey squirrels. However, we do not consider that a bounty is an appropriate or satisfactory mechanism.

Fisheries Grant Scheme

Mr. Steen: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food, pursuant to his answer to the hon. Member for Stroud (Mr. Drew) of 21 May 1999, *Official Report*, columns *451–52* on spending priorities, what has been the total grant paid through the fisheries grant scheme in each of the last five years; and what was the total grant allocation available for spending. [85853]

Mr. Morley: The grant paid, in each of the last five years, for fishing vessel safety equipment grants, harbour grants, processing and marketing grants and port facilities grants against the grant allocation held by the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food for these schemes was as follows:

£

Year	*Allocation*	*Grant paid*
1994–95	5,819,000	5,060,452
1995–96	4,827,000	3,315,804
1996–97	4,572,000	1,573,884
1997–98	4,572,000	2,781,378
1998–99	4,072,000	2,176,749

Mr. Steen: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food how many grants and to what value have been given to the fishermen from (i) Brixham, (ii) Paignton, (iii) Kingswear, (iv) Dartmouth, (v) Salcombe and (vi) the West Country in total for harbour and fishing vessel safety equipment in each of the last five years. [85852]

Mr. Morley: No grants under the national harbour grant scheme or the EU port facilities grant scheme have been awarded to Brixham, Dartmouth, Kingswear, Paignton or Salcombe in the last five years. The numbers of projects and value of grants awarded to the West Country (Devon and Cornwall) under both schemes is as follows:

£

Year	*Projects*	*Amounts*
1994–95	4	112,000
1995–96	2	12,000
1996–97	3	66,000
1997–98	6	99,000
1998–99	2	112,000
Total	17	401,000

Information on numbers and value of grants for fishing vessel safety equipment is not held by port or region and could be obtained only at disproportionate cost.

Mr. Salmond: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food if he will list the total grants available from (i) his Department and (ii) the EU for each of the last 10 years for fishing safety measures. [85952]

Mr. Morley: Prior to the introduction of the Fishing Vessels (Safety Improvements) (Grants) Scheme 1993 fishing safety measures were subsumed in the wider fishing vessel modernisation schemes and separate funding figures for these elements are not available. From 1993–94 the figures for this and subsequent schemes are as follows:

£000

Year	*National (UK)*	*EU (England)*
1993–94	1,800	0
1994–95	2,500	50
1995–96	1,177	213
1996–97	965	212
1997–98	965	212
1998–99	965	212

Mr. Salmond: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what grants will be available from (i) his Department and (ii) the EU for each of the next three years for fishing safety measures. [85953]

Mr. Morley: I refer the hon. Member to the reply given by my right hon. Friend to my hon. Friend the Member for Stroud (Mr. Drew) on 21 May 1999, *Official Report*, columns *451–52* on spending priorities. This made clear that the fishing vessel safety equipment grants scheme was being closed to new applicants from that day. Thus, no further grants will be available for fishing safety measures from the Department. Neither will EU grants be available as these require national co-funding. However, all grant approvals in respect of applications received before 21 May will be honoured.

Mr. Steen: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food, pursuant to his answer to the hon. Member for Stroud (Mr. Drew) of 21 May 1999, *Official Report*, columns *451–52* on spending priorities, what was the legislative authority for the introduction of the fishing vessel safety equipment grant; and what compliance cost assessment was carried out *(a)* at its introduction and *(b)* prior to its discontinuation. [85854]

Mr. Morley: The legislative authority for nationally funded fishing vessel safety equipment grants is the Fishing Vessels (Safety Improvements) (Grants) Scheme 1995 (SI 1995 No 1609) made under section 15 of the Fisheries Act 1981. The legislative authority for EU grants and the necessary national back-up grant is the Fisheries and Aquaculture Structures (Grants) Regulations 1995 (SI 1995 No 1576).

Compliance cost assessments are not required for the introduction or discontinuation of grant schemes such as these.

Genetically Modified Crops

Mr. Yeo: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what compensation is available for farmers whose businesses are compromised through the cross-pollination of their non-genetically modified crops with genetically modified crops. [86130]

Mr. Nick Brown: The Government believe that observance of best agriculture practice, including the SCIMAC "Guidelines for growing newly developed herbicide tolerant crops" will ensure that the risk of cross pollination of non-GM crops, and hence compromise to neighbouring farmers' businesses, is minimised.

Mr. Yeo: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what protection from cross-pollination of genetically modified crops and non-genetically modified crops exists for *(a)* organic farmers and *(b)* conventional farmers. [86129]

Mr. Nick Brown: When evaluating applications for the release of genetically modified crops the Advisory Committee on Releases to the Environment (ACRE) considers the risks associated with cross pollination and would recommend conditions on the release consent if this was believed to be necessary. Additionally, the SCIMAC "Guidelines for growing newly developed herbicide tolerant crops" include separation distances between GM and non-GM (conventional and organic) crops to ensure that the risk of cross pollination is minimised.

Mr. Yeo: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what steps he is taking to ensure that companies involved in the commercial growing of genetically modified crops segregate genetically modified crops from non-genetically modified crops. [86134]

Mr. Nick Brown: The SCIMAC stewardship programme for the introduction of genetically modified crops launched on 21 May includes the key principle of preserving the identity of GM crops up to the point that they leave the farm gate. This will enable food processors and manufacturers to distinguish between GM and non-GM products and provide consumers with a choice if that is what they want.

Mr. Yeo: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food if the new measures he announced in his statement to the House on biotechnology on 21 May 1999, *Official Report*, columns 1371–84, will include the extension of buffer zones between fields of genetically modified crops and fields of non-genetically modified crops. [86132]

Mr. Nick Brown: The statement by my right hon. Friend the Minister for the Cabinet Office welcomed the SCIMAC "Guidelines for growing newly developed herbicide tolerant crops", which include separation distances between GM and non-GM crops to ensure that the risk of cross pollination is minimised. SCIMAC has indicated that it is happy to review these guidelines, including the separation distances, if new evidence shows that this is required.

Mr. Yeo: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food if he will publish the research commissioned by his Department into the cross-contamination between genetically modified crops and crops that are not genetically modified. [84533]

Mr. Nick Brown: *[holding answer 17 May 1999]:* Yes. The report on organic farming and gene transfer from genetically modified crops, commissioned from the John Innes Centre, is being prepared by them for publication and we expect it to be published shortly.

Bovine Somatotropin

Mr. Baker: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what trials of the synthetically genetically engineered dairy hormone bovine somatotropin were conducted in the UK prior to the imposition of an EU moratorium and between which dates; how many farms were involved; what the locations of the farms involved were; what quantity of milk containing this hormone was sold for human consumption; and if he will make a statement. [85743]

Mr. Rooker: Two Animal Test Certificates (ATCs) were issued in 1985 under the terms of the Medicines Act 1968 to Monsanto Europe SA and Lilly Industries Ltd respectively. A total of 38 farms and agricultural institutes were used in the tests at sites across the country. The timing of trials and the location of the farms and institutes concerned are confidential to the manufacturers but all trials took place before the imposition of the EU moratorium. No conditions were applied to the disposal of milk from treated cows. The normal concentration of BST in milk is not affected by the treatment of cows with BST.

Genetically Modified Food

Mr. Baker: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food if he will set out the terms of reference for the trials on patients in a Newcastle hospital involving genetically modified food. [85741]

Mr. Rooker: Any potential health risks that could arise as a result of the transfer of transgenes from genetically modified (GM) foods to human gut flora and gut cells are considered by the Advisory Committee on Novel Foods and Processes (ACNFP) as part of its rigorous safety assessment of such products. All the GM foods which have been approved for use in the UK to date have been assessed as safe for human consumption.

The project in question is being funded to provide further background data to quantify the very low probability of such transfer occurring, by examining some model systems. The majority of the work involves looking at *in vitro* systems for possible transfer of genes from GM micro-organisms to human gut flora and to isolated gut cells. It will also investigate the survival of GM material derived from plants in the human small intestine, firstly by looking at a model, *in vitro*, system which mimics the conditions in the small intestine. This will then be followed up by human volunteer studies to evaluate the applicability of the model to the *in vivo* situation.

The terms of reference of this work require the contractor to warrant that human volunteer studies carried out as part of the contract have obtained written approval from an ethics committee which has been properly constituted in accordance with all published guidelines, in particular those of the Department of Health.

Genetically Modified Pollen

Mr. Baker: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what requirements are placed on honey producers in respect of the labelling of honey which may contain genetically modified pollen. [85923]

Mr. Rooker: Any food, including honey, that contains genetically modified (GM) material must be clearly labelled in accordance with EC Regulations 258/97 and 1139/98.

Cormorants

Mr. Soames: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food how many licences to cull cormorants were issued by Her Majesty's Government in each of the last five years. [85773]

Mr. Morley: Licences are issued to shoot a limited number of cormorants as an aid to scaring. The number of licences issued for the last five years in England are as follows:

	Number of licences issued
1 May 1994–30 April 1995	35
1 May 1995–30 April 1996	50
1 May 1996–30 April 1997	47
1 May 1997–30 April 1998	70
1 May 1998–28 February 1999[1]	71

[1] Latest figures available

Details of licences issued in Wales and Scotland are the responsibility of the respective Secretaries of State.

Fisheries

Mr. Gill: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what was the annual *(a)* value and *(b)* tonnage of fish caught by British-owned fishing vessels in each of the last five years. [84907]

Mr. Morley: The value and tonnage of catches landed by UK registered fishing vessels during the last five years was as follows:

Fish landing into the UK and abroad by UK registered vessels

Year	*Quantity (000 tonnes)*	*Value (£ million)*
1993	857.6	526.0
1994	874.9	561.4
1995	911.8	590.1
1996	892.3	636.5
1997	881.9	621.9

Mr. Gill: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what estimate he has made of the number of jobs sustained *(a)* afloat and *(b)* ashore by the activities of British-owned fishing vessels. [84908]

Mr. Morley: Data from an annual survey indicate that the number of UK fishermen in 1997 was 18,604.

The annual Census of Employment carried out by the Office for National Statistics indicates that in 1997 there were 19,454 people employed in the processing and preserving of fish in Great Britain.

Special Advisers

Mr. Tyrie: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food, pursuant to his answer of 15 April 1999, *Official Report*, column *319*, on special advisers, if he will give the total travel cost of each occasion when advisers have travelled abroad in an official capacity since 2 May 1997 and the place visited. [82409]

Mr. Nick Brown: For the period 2 May 1997 to 31 March 1999, my predecessor's Special Advisers travelled overseas in an official capacity on 4 occasions to Brussels and South Africa. The total cost of travel and any hotel accommodation was £5,978.

My Special Advisers have travelled overseas in an official capacity on nine occasions to Brussels, Luxembourg and Stockholm. The total cost of travel and any hotel accommodation was £4,790.

In addition a Special Adviser travelled with me to Latin America in an official capacity on one occasion. The total cost of travel and any hotel accommodation was £5,023. These costs were met by the Foreign and Commonwealth Office.

All travel was judged to comply with the requirements of the Ministerial Code and the Civil Service Management Code.

Cattle Passports

Mr. Campbell-Savours: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food how many cattle passports have been produced at the Cattle Traceability Centre in Workington in each week in the last six months. [85465]

Mr. Rooker: The number of cattle passports produced by the British Cattle Movement Service (BCMS) each week in the last six months is as follows:

Week commencing	*Number of passports produced*
16 November 1998	51,153
23 November 1998	54,860
30 November 1998	50,277
7 December 1998	59,383
14 December 1998	33,807
21 December 1998	36,710
28 December 1998	12,094
4 January 1999	59,595
11 January 1999	49,958
18 January 1999	52,910
25 January 1999	39,091
1 February 1999	37,935
8 February 1999	33,540
15 February 1999	47,021
22 February 1999	35,189
1 March 1999	54,290
8 March 1999	48,715
15 March 1999	52,226
22 March 1999	67,112
29 March 1999	57,496
5 April 1999	49,199
12 April 1999	115,476
19 April 1999	81,361
26 April 1999	90,455
3 May 1999	39,107
10 May 1999	129,758
17 May 1999	90,820
Total for period	1,529,538

Parliamentary Questions

Mr. Maclean: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food if he will account for the delay in responding to the question from the right hon. Member

for Penrith and the Border of 13 May 1999 [84698]; and if he was in possession of a provisional agenda at the time of issuing a holding answer. [85632]

Mr. Nick Brown: At the time the holding reply was issued the Council had concluded. I refer the right hon. Member to the reply I gave to my hon. Friend the Member for Harlow (Mr. Rammell) on 24 May 1999, *Official Report*, columns *40–41*, on the outcome of the Council.

Dietary Supplements

Mr. Jim Cunningham: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what assessment he has made of health risks related to higher dose supplements and vitamins. [85268]

Mr. Rooker *[holding answer 26 May 1999]:* The Committee on Medical Aspects of Food and Nutrition Policy (COMA) has recommended that caution needs to be exercised in the use of high doses of purified supplements of micronutrients as they cannot be assumed to be without risk. It has also advised against the use of beta carotene supplements as a means of protecting against cancer.

The Government have since established the Expert Group on Vitamins and Minerals to consider the safety of vitamins and minerals in supplements sold under food law. It is expected to complete its task around the end of 2000.

Mr. Jim Cunningham: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what negotiations he has had with his European Union partners on policy relating to higher dose supplements and vitamins. [85269]

Mr. Rooker *[holding answer 26 May 1999]:* The EU Commission is considering the possibility of harmonising controls on the sale of vitamin and mineral supplements but has not yet issued any proposals for legislation. There have not therefore been any negotiations on this matter.

Fisheries Council

Mr. Maclean: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food if he will publish the latest agenda of the Fisheries Council of 10 June, prior to the meeting. [85633]

Mr. Morley: The agenda for the Council is expected to cover: reform of the structural funds for fisheries; a draft Council Regulation on serious infringements of the rules of the Common Fisheries Policy; the allocation of blue whiting TACs and new TACs for spurdog and Northern shrimp; an interim report from the Commission on its cost/benefit analysis of Third Country Agreements; EU fisheries relations with Morocco; follow-up to the Bergen Inter-Ministerial Meeting; and Sandeel conservation. Under Any Other Business Italy will be raising the situation in the Adriatic as a consequence of the Kosovo conflict.

Absinthe

Mr. Leigh: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food if he will make a statement on his plans to introduce measures to ban the sale of absinthe. [85364]

Mr. Rooker *[holding answer 25 May 1999]:* I have no plans to introduce such measures.

Horse Breeders

Mr. Blizzard: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what plans he has to help the British thoroughbred horse breeders to compete internationally. [85210]

Mr. Nick Brown: The Government recognise the economic importance of the horse industry, and for that reason has welcomed the recent establishment of the British Horse Industry Confederation, an organisation set up to foster the interests of all sectors of the horse industry. In this role, the Confederation will be working constructively to promote the competitive position of the British thoroughbred horse breeding industry, as well as raising the profile of other parts of this important rural industry.

Climate Change Levy

Mrs. Brinton: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what assessment he has made of the effect of the proposed climate change levy on *(a)* the horticultural sector, *(b)* the poultry sector and *(c)* consumer food prices in these sectors. [85095]

Mr. Rooker: Lord Marshall's Report on the role of economic instruments and the business use of energy, was published in November 1998. Since the publication of that report, my department has provided further information to other Government Departments on trends in energy use in the horticulture sector. The Government will take sectoral impacts, including any potential impacts on prices and competitiveness, into account in setting the final rates of the climate change levy.

Birth Certificates

Mr. Charles Kennedy: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food if he will list the purposes for which his Department and its agencies require a birth certificate to be provided by *(a)* employees, contractors and persons applying for employment and contracts and *(b)* others. [84326]

Mr. Nick Brown: A birth certificate, or similar documentary evidence, may be required for one or more of the following purposes:

(i) proof of identity;

(ii) proof of eligibility under the Civil Service Nationality Rules;

(iii) proof of age;

(iv) any legal requirements.

Agencies, other than the Pesticides Safety Directorate (PSD), the Central Science Laboratory (CSL), the Centre for Environment, Fisheries and Aquaculture Science (CEFAS), and the Veterinary Laboratories Agency (VLA) will reply direct.

Letter from Johnston McNeill to Mr. Charles Kennedy, dated 8 June 1999:

As Chief Executive of the Meat Hygiene Service (MHS) your question to the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food requesting information on the purposes for which a birth certificate is required to be provided by (a) employees and contractors, and persons applying for employment and contract and (b) others has been passed to me for reply as regards this Executive Agency.

The main purpose in the MHS requiring sight of a birth certificate for directly employed staff is to verify identity and to confirm eligibility of the individual for employment under Civil Service nationality provisions.

The MHS also makes extensive use of veterinary surgeons supplied on contract obtained following a national competitive tendering exercise. The MHS does not require sight of birth certificates for these individuals.

Letter from Sarah Nason to Mr. Charles Kennedy, dated 8 June 1999:

The Minister has asked me to respond, in respect of the Farming and Rural Conservation Agency (FRCA), to your question about the purposes for which his Department and its agencies require a birth certificate to be provided by (a) employees and contractors, and persons applying for employment and contracts and (b) others.

FRCA requests birth certificates during recruitment for identification purposes.

Letter from John Fitzgerald to Mr. Charles Kennedy, dated 8 June 1999:

In my Chief Executive's absence the Minister has asked me to reply on behalf of the Veterinary Medicines Directorate (VMD) to your question about the purposes for which the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food and its agencies require a birth certificate to be provided by their employees and contractors, persons applying for employment or contracts, and others.

The only such time that the VMD would ask for birth certificates to be provided would be as part of a recruitment exercise. These would be used to confirm identify and age of candidates and to verify their eligibility for employment under the Civil Service nationality rules.

Agriculture Council

Mr. Maclean: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food if he will publish the agenda for the Agriculture Council of 17 to 18 May. [84698]

Mr. Nick Brown *[holding answer 18 May 1999]:* The agenda for the 17 May Agriculture Council covered the following items:

Approval of the list of 'A' items

State of the Pigmeat Market

Progress Reports:

Bananas

Hormones

(Information from the Commission)

Proposal for a Council Regulation amending Regulation (EEC) No.2377/90 laying down a Community Procedure for the establishment of maximum residue limits of veterinary medicinal products in foodstuffs of animal origin.

(Draft Council Conclusions)

Discussion on a Draft Council Resolution on Antibiotic Resistance.

HOME DEPARTMENT

Asylum and Immigration Cases (Costs)

Fiona Mactaggart: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what were the agreed baseline costs for *(a)* asylum and *(b)* immigration cases agreed between the Immigration and Nationality Directorate and Siemens Business Services in November 1997; what are the current baseline costs for each type of case; and what changes in the contract have been made since November 1997. [85040]

Mr. Mike O'Brien: In order to calculate the productivity charges payable to Siemens Business Services under the terms of the Casework Contract, the Immigration and Nationality Directorate (IND) calculated the cost of a range of types of case over the baseline period October 1995 to September 1996. For this baseline period, costs, which exclude some overheads, were calculated for individual types of immigration casework, including an asylum case and a general or settlement immigration case, and for a standard unit of IND casework. IND no longer calculates the unit cost for individual types of cases. The available unit costs of IND casework for the baseline period, November 1997, November 1998 and April 1999 are shown in the table:

£

	Cost of asylum case	*Cost of a general or settlement immigration case*	*Unit cost of range of IND casework*
Baseline (October 1995–September 1996)	358.58	54.04	42.89
November 1997	n/a	n/a	45.69
November 1998	n/a	n/a	41.72
April 1999	n/a	n/a	43.66

Formal changes have been made to Schedule 11 (Programme Plan) to alter the project timetable, to Schedule 15 (Service Change Procedure) to include additional training, and to Schedule 26 (Programme and Contract Management) to reflect changes to the personnel of the contractor and the authority.

Asylum Seekers

Fiona Mactaggart: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many people are working on clearing the backlog of asylum applications made before 31 December 1995; how many decisions on these applications have been made in each month since July 1998; how many of these decisions have been *(a)* indefinite leave, *(b)* exceptional leave, *(c)* refusals and *(d)* other; how many applications are outstanding from (i) before July 1993 and (ii) between July 1993 and December 1995; and when he expects this backlog to be cleared. [85044]

Mr. Mike O'Brien: There are a total of 51 Home Office staff of all grades working to clear the remaining unresolved asylum applications lodged before 1 January 1996. As at the end of April 1999, it is estimated that there remained 4,465 applications outstanding made before July 1993 and 16,730 made between July 1993 and December 1995.

Between 1 December 1998 and 31 April 1999 a total of 2,910 decisions on pre-1 January 1996 applications were made by the teams established to deal with the backlog. Of these, 2,130 were pre-July 1993 applications granted indefinite leave while 610 were grants of exceptional leave in July 1993 to December 1995 applications. 160 applications of the latter group were recognised as refugees and granted asylum. A total of 10 applications have been refused.

It is intended that the applications made before July 1993 be cleared by September 1999 and those lodged between July 1993 and December 1995 by April 2000.

Mr. Clappison: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department, pursuant to his answer of 19 May 1999, *Official Report*, column *369*, on asylum seekers, when he plans to write. [85944]

Mr. Mike O'Brien: A written reply was sent on 28 May 1999.

Electoral Malpractice (Hackney)

Dr. Cable: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how much money has been spent to date by *(a)* the Crown Prosecution Service, *(b)* the police and *(c)* his Department on investigations into electoral malpractice in Hackney Borough; and if he will make a statement. [85361]

Mr. George Howarth: The Commissioner of Police of the Metropolis estimates the cost of the investigation into complaints of electoral malpractice at London borough elections in 1998 as approximately £85,000 to date. No Home Office money has been spent. The inquiry is still ongoing and is, therefore, an operational matter for the Metropolitan police.

Correspondence

Mr. Maclean: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department, pursuant to his answers of 22 February 1999, *Official Report*, column *103*, on young offenders and 2 March 1999, *Official Report*, column *636*, on persistent offenders, when he plans to write to the right hon. Member for Penrith and the Border. [85433]

Mr. Straw: I expect to write to the right hon. Gentleman within the next ten days.

Diarmuid O'Neill

Mr. McNamara: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will request the Police Complaints Authority to report to him on the circumstances of the death of Diarmuid O'Neill under section 97(1) of the Police and Criminal Evidence Act 1984; and if he will lay the report before Parliament. [85340]

Mr. Straw: It is for the Police Complaints Authority (PCA) to decide, under section 79(2) of the Police Act 1996 (previously section 97(2) of the 1984 Act), whether to make a report on any matters which they consider should be brought to my attention by reason of their gravity or other exceptional circumstances. I am not aware of any plans to make such a report on the case of Diarmuid O'Neill.

I can only call for a report on such matters relating generally to the PCA's functions. It does not allow me to call for a report on a specific investigation.

The circumstances of Mr. O'Neill's death will be the subject of a coroner's inquest currently being scheduled.

Children's Passports

Mr. Olner: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what measures have been implemented at airports to check children's passports. [85327]

Mr. Mike O'Brien: All arriving passengers, including children, are liable to be examined by an immigration officer in order to determine identity and nationality. No particular distinction is made between the examination of adults' and children's passports.

The previous Administration had already removed, in 1994, embarkation controls for passengers travelling from ferry ports and small airports to destinations within the European Union/European Economic Area, with the consequence that some 40 per cent. of all departing passengers were not seen by an immigration officer. There has never been an embarkation control for channel tunnel services. What was left of the control was, therefore, ineffective in providing a reliable record of a person's departure, and we have since introduced new arrangements following my reply to my hon. Friend the Member for Wythenshawe and Sale, East (Mr. Goggins), *Official Report*, columns *506–07* on 16 March 1998.

The new system involves a close partnership between the control authorities and port operators based on intelligence and target led embarkation checks, including the increased use of closed circuit television. There are no plans to reinstate routine embarkation controls, although immigration officers will continue to retain their powers to examine the passports of departing passengers if circumstances require.

Mr. Olner: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many children's passports have been issued within the last 12 months. [85326]

Mr. Mike O'Brien: In the period 1 May 1998 to 30 April 1999, 889,180 passports were issued to applicants who were children under the age of 16.

Mr. Olner: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what steps have been taken in respect of the endorsement of children's passports with relevant court orders. [85328]

Mr. Mike O'Brien: No steps have yet been taken in respect of the endorsement of children's passports. This important issue will be looked at by the Parent/Carer Child Abduction Co-ordinating Group of officials in the light of the arrangements for embarkation controls introduced in March 1998.

However, there are a number of measures in place to ensure compliance with court orders in relation to the issuing of children's passports. Where it is known that a child is a ward of court, or subject to a prohibited steps order requiring the leave of the court before removal from the United Kingdom, passport facilities are not granted unless the court's permission is obtained.

The Passport Agency also operates a scheme whereby a parent or other objector, where there is a court order in their favour, can ask the Agency not to issue a passport for a child. The Passport Agency ensures that the terms of the court order, about removal of the child from the jurisdiction, are met before issuing a passport. Where a child is already in possession of a valid passport, the court is able to order its surrender where there is in force an order prohibiting or otherwise restricting the removal of the child from the United Kingdom.

A requirement for children to hold separate passports was introduced in October 1998, one of the main aims of this policy being to make child abduction more difficult.

Gloucestershire Fire Brigade

Mrs. Organ: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many call-outs were responded to by the Gloucestershire fire brigade in *(a)* 1997, *(b)* 1998 and *(c)* 1999 to date. [85440]

Mr. George Howarth: The information in the table shows the total number of fires and false alarms attended by Gloucestershire Fire Brigade, for 1997 and 1998. Information for 1999 is not yet available centrally.

Gloucestershire Fire Brigade	*1997*[1]	*1998*[1]
Total fires	2,864	2,649
False alarms	3,023	2,773
Total fires and false alarms	5,887	5,422

[1] Provisional data. Figures include late call, heat and smoke incidents.

Special service incidents are recorded on a financial year basis. Gloucestershire fire brigade recorded 1,492 special service incidents for the financial year 1997–98. Data for 1998–99 are not yet available.

Mrs. Organ: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many deaths caused by fire occurred in Gloucestershire in *(a)* 1997, *(b)* 1998 and *(c)* 1999 to date. [85441]

Mr. George Howarth: Provisional figures show that Gloucestershire fire brigade recorded eight fire-related deaths in 1997 and three in 1998. Data for 1999 are not yet available, centrally.

These figures may be subject to change; there are circumstances in which further information becomes available (from death certificates, inquests etc.) where the cause of death is not actually the fire, or where perhaps persons may die sometime after the fire due to injuries sustained.

Prison Officers (Complaints)

Mr. Stinchcombe: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what disciplinary sanctions have been imposed on prison officers following complaints of ill-treatment in each of the last five years. [84944]

Mr. George Howarth: The table shows, from those records which are available, the penalties awarded to prison officer grades under the Prison Service code of conduct and discipline, for misconduct involving ill-treatment of prisoners, for the last five financial years.

Penalties awarded to prison officer grades for misconduct involving ill-treatment of prisoners

Year/offence	*Penalty*
1994–95	
Assault	Final written warning and loss of increment
Assault	Dismissed (but Civil Service Appeal Board upheld appeal)
Incorrect Control and Restraint Procedures	Written Warning
Questioned prisoner in unprofessional manner	Warning
1995–96	
Assault	Final written warning and loss of increment
Theft of Prisoner's monies	Dismissed
1996–97	
Assault	Final written warning. Removal from field of promotion
Physical abuse of prisoners	Final written warning
Use of unnecessary force	Final written warning. Removal from field of promotion
Inappropriate behaviour	Final written warning
Excessive use of force	Final written warning
1997–98	
Assault	Final written warning
Assault	Dismissed
Excessive force	Final written warning
Unnecessary application of handcuff restraints	Oral warning
Forced strip search (3 officers)	Dismissed
1998–99	
Assault	Final warning. Removal from field of promotion
Assault	Dismissed
Assault	Written warning
Unnecessary force	Oral warning
Failure to obtain authorisation for search and to report use of force	Written warning
Verbal abuse	Written warning
Offensive language to prisoner in dangerous situation	Final written warning
Indecent behaviour	Dismissed (appeal pending)

Passports

Fiona Mactaggart: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many applicants made complaints to the Immigration and Nationality Directorate concerning lost passports in each quarter since the second quarter of 1996; and in how many cases the passports were subsequently found. [85486]

Mr. Mike O'Brien: Complaints received by the Immigration and Nationality Directorate (IND) are not recorded centrally on the basis of subject matter. Information kept centrally is in respect of the number of compensation claims dealt with as a result of maladministration, the majority of which will have arisen as a result of lost documents. This is a lagging indicator as there is often a considerable gap between an incident

and the claim for compensation arising from it. The figures for each quarter since the third quarter of 1996 are set out in the table:

	1996	*1997*	*1998*	*1999*
First Quarter	7	10	6	22
Second Quarter	2	7	17	n/a
Third Quarter	6	5	18	n/a
Fourth Quarter	18	18	23	n/a

Information on how many passports were subsequently found is not held centrally. Passports which are found once a compensation claim has been paid are, where appropriate, returned to the issuing authority.

Stephen Lawrence

Mr. Maclean: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what representations he has received on the disappearance of a criminal file from police records relating to Stephen Lawrence; and if he will make a statement. [85630]

Mr. Straw: I have received no such representations, nor is the Metropolitan Police Service or the Secretariat of the Stephen Lawrence inquiry aware of any such missing file. If the right hon. Member would write to me with further details I should be happy to make inquiries on his behalf.

K4 Committee

Mr. Mitchell: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department, pursuant to his answer of 20 May 1999, *Official Report*, column *445*, on the K4 Committee, if he *(a)* sent details of the agenda items to the Home Affairs Committee and *(b)* had consultations with United Kingdom bodies concerning mutual recognition of criminal court decisions. [85563]

Mr. Straw: It was not the general practice of the Government to report to Parliament on the business of the K4 Committee, in view of that Committee's role as an interim, problem-solving body whose members were responsible to their respective Ministers. Details of the agenda for the meeting on 29–30 April were not, therefore, sent to the Home Affairs Committee.

I outlined the concept of mutual recognition in a speech at the Avignon Seminar on the European Judicial Space on 16 October last year, which was made available to the press. My hon. Friend the Member for Vauxhall (Kate Hoey), the Under-Secretary of State, gave further details of these proposals in oral evidence to the House of Lords European Communities Committee on 24 March, after which a United Kingdom discussion paper on mutual recognition was tabled in the Article K4 Committee on 29 March, and submitted for United Kingdom Parliamentary Scrutiny on 31 March. The Government intend to carry out further consultations with United Kingdom bodies depending on the progress of discussions in the Council of European Union on the basis of the United Kingdom paper.

Supporting Families

Angela Smith: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will publish the results of the consultation on Supporting Families. [86302]

Mr. Straw: This morning, I placed a summary of the responses to 'Supporting Families' in the Library. Copies of the document are also available from the Vote Office.

Birth Certificates

Mr. Cann: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will list those purposes for which his Department and its executive agencies require a birth certificate to be provided by *(a)* employees, *(b)* contractors, *(c)* those applying for employment and contracts and *(d)* other persons. [85685]

Mr. Straw: Birth certificates are routinely requested as an optional form of identification for recruitment and pension purposes. They are normally required for the issue of passports and for applications to remain in the United Kingdom on the basis of marriage to a British Citizen. My Department does not normally require existing employees or contractors to provide birth certificates.

Speed Limits

Mr. Casale: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what plans he has to ensure that the Metropolitan Police have sufficient resources effectively to enforce speed limits. [86077]

Kate Hoey: Effective enforcement of the speed limit is an important police function for which the funding of the Metropolitan Police already provides. The deployment of resources to meet prioritised policing objectives in this area is a matter for the Commissioner of Police of the Metropolis.

Drug Orders

Mr. Clappison: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what proportion of drug treatment and testing orders have been revoked since 30 September 1998. [85770]

Mr. George Howarth: As at 2 June 1999, 68 Drug Treatment and Testing Orders had been made, of which 10 had been revoked: 14.7 per cent.

Mr. Clappison: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many offenders have been *(a)* assessed for and *(b)* made subject to drug treatment and testing orders in (i) Liverpool, (ii) Croydon and (iii) Gloucester since 30 September 1998. [85765]

Mr. George Howarth: The information is shown in the table.

	Number of offenders[1] assessed for drug treatment and testing orders	*Number of offenders[1] subject to drug treatment and treatment orders*
Liverpool	60	26
Croydon	35	11
Gloucestershire	92	32

[1] As at 2 June 1999

Drug Related Offences

Mr. Clappison: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department (1) what estimate he has made of

the proportion of indictable offences which fall into the category of drug related offences in the most recent period for which figures are available; [85764]

(2) what proportion of indictable offences were the result of drug related offending in the most recent period for which figures are available. [85767]

Mr. George Howarth: The information requested on the proportion of indictable offences being drug-related is not available for the country as a whole. As I stated in my reply on 27 April 1999, *Official Report,* column *110,* a report was published last year on preliminary research carried out on behalf of the Home Office by the University of Cambridge, which shed light on the links between drugs and crime. Further work is currently being conducted within this programme. The results will be published later this year. This additional work is intended to pave the way for a larger, regular programme.

The research undertaken so far on drug testing of arrestees, based in five locations, indicates that over 60 per cent. of arrestees had recently taken at least one illegal drug prior to arrest. Cannabis was found most often (46 per cent. of cases); heroin/opiates (18 per cent.) and cocaine/crack (10 per cent.) featured quite prominently. These findings confirm the supposition that offenders tend to be heavy consumers of drugs.

Nearly half the arrestees who reported taking drugs within the last year said that their drug misuse was connected with their offending. Among various factors, they emphasised the need for the money to buy drugs. The illegal income of arrestees who said that they had taken heroin and/or crack cocaine during the last three days was particularly high—within a range of £10,000 to £20,000 annually. This compared with £4,000 for other arrestees. Illegal income mainly resulted from acquisitive crimes against property. An estimated 32 per cent. of all illegal income was spent on purchasing heroin and/or crack cocaine.

Whilst this study considerably advances knowledge of drugs-crime links, it will always be difficult to calculate a single percentage figure reflecting precisely what proportion of all crime is drug-related.

Figures on drug offences in 1997 were recently published in Home Office Statistical Bulletin No. 8/99, "Drug seizure and offender statistics, United Kingdom, 1997", copies of which are available in the Library.

Fire Service College, Moreton-in-Marsh

Mr. Clifton-Brown: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if the terms of reference for the Options Review Team for the Fire Service College, Moreton-in-Marsh, provide for the financial figures for 1998–99 and projected figures for 1999–2000 to be taken into consideration in forming the conclusions. [85709]

Mr. George Howarth: The terms of reference require an evaluation of the financial and management performance generally of the Fire Service College and specifically by reference to the financial targets and key performance indicators included in the Framework Document and the College's Corporate Plans. The evaluation will be based on relevant evidence including the audited financial accounts of the College and any other validated reliable financial information.

Mr. Clifton-Brown: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will list the members of the Options Review Team for the Fire Service College, Moreton-in-Marsh; how many of them are related to each other; and what resignations there have been and for what reasons. [85708]

Mr. George Howarth: The members of the Review Team are: V. Harris (Home Office); G. Meldrum (Her Majesty's Chief Inspector of Fire Services); A. Hughes (West Yorkshire Fire Brigade); and G. Fredericks (London Fire Brigade). In addition, I have appointed three expert assessors all of whom are offering their services on a pro-bono basis. They are: J. G. Carr; D. A. Defty; and A. P. Harris. A. P. Harris is the spouse of V. Harris.

At an earlier stage in the review, A. Wroclawski from the Kent Fire Brigade was attached to the team but has now returned to his brigade.

Police Officers (Leeds)

Mr. Clifton-Brown: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will list the total number of police officers in *(a)* 1997, *(b)* 1998 and *(c)* 1999 in the Leeds, Central constituency. [85704]

Mr. Boateng: I understand from the Chief Constable of West Yorkshire that the number of police officers in the Millgarth Division of Leeds which covers the Leeds Central constituency was as follows:

Year	*Number of officers*
31 March 1997	224
31 March 1998	228
31 March 1999	220

Shamrock Ltd.

Mr. Cohen: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how often Shamrock Ltd. of Henfield, West Sussex, (or the relevant certificate holder) is inspected by the Animal (Scientific Procedures) Inspectorate; and when it was last inspected. [86110]

Mr. George Howarth: This establishment is generally visited on a monthly basis: there have been four visits so far this year, three of which were unannounced. It was last inspected in May and that visit was unannounced. I also visited the establishment myself on 15 December last year.

Imported Primates

Mr. Cohen: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many primates imported into the UK for research purposes in the last five years from *(a)* China, *(b)* Mauritius, *(c)* Indonesia, *(d)* the Philippines and *(e)* other countries were (i) dead on arrival at the UK and (ii) suffered serious injury during transit, broken down (1) by the species of primate, (2) the place where the death or injury was discovered, (3) the cause of the death or injury and (4) in the case of injury, disposal of the primate. [86102]

Mr. George Howarth: Records made available to the Home Office show that during the last five years, 11 deaths have occurred in consignments of non-human primates arriving in the United Kingdom for use in regulated procedures in this country. One further animal is recorded as having sustained serious injury, necessitating euthanasia on arrival. The details are as follows:

China

In 1994, two cynomolgus macaques were found to be dead on arrival in Paris. There was no obvious cause of death.

In 1995, one rhesus macaque was found to be dead on arrival in the United Kingdom. The cause of death was probably associated with pneumonia.

Mauritius

In 1995, one cynomolgus macaque was found to be dead on arrival in the United Kingdom. The cause of death was believed to be enteritis.

In 1996, one cynomolgus macaque was found to be dead on arrival in the United Kingdom. The cause of death was believed to be shigellosis.

In 1997, one cynomolgus macaque was found to be traumatised on arrival in the United Kingdom, possibly as a result of being pair-housed during transport. It was humanely killed and all primates are now individually housed during transport.

Indonesia

No reports of deaths or injury in transit received.

Philippines

In 1994, one cynomolgus macaque was found to be dead on arrival in the United Kingdom. The cause of death was believed to be enteritis.

In 1997, one cynomolgus macaque was found to be dead on arrival in the United Kingdom. The cause of death was probably a trauma to the head.

In 1998, three cynomolgus macaques were found to be dead on arrival in Paris. The causes of death were not ascertained, but it is believed that they were probably due to a combination of factors:

(i) the animals concerned were larger than normal;

(ii) although International Air Transport Association minimum dimensions were not breached, the containers were not large enough to allow these particular animals to stand up and turn around freely; and

(iii) all the dead animals had been in central compartments, which were less well ventilated.

Whilst enforcement of European Union rules on the protection of animals in transport would have been for the French authorities in this case, we ensured that the containers were enlarged and redesigned to rectify these problems.

Israel

In 1998, one cynomolgus macaque was found to be dead on arrival in the United Kingdom. There was no obvious cause of death.

Correspondence

Mr. Cotter: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department when he will reply to the letter from the hon. Member for Weston-super-Mare of 11 January concerning Avon Probation Service. [85657]

Mr. George Howarth: The letter in question was unfortunately misplaced in the Home Office. This was an unacceptable failure, and staff have been informed accordingly. A considered reply has been sent and the action promised in that reply has been completed.

Stop and Search

Mr. Gerald Howarth: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many stop and search operations have been conducted by the Metropolitan Police in each month in 1999; and what was the total number of reported crimes for each month. [85560]

Kate Hoey: The Commissioner of Police of the Metropolis has provided the following data:

1999	*Police and Criminal Evidence Act 1984 stop and search*	*Total notifiable offences*
January	25,715	78,212
February	18,752	74,589
March	14,005	87,444
April	14,110	85,194

Judicial and Police Co-operation

Mr. Mitchell: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what discussions he expects to take place in the Council of Ministers relating to judicial and police co-operation in respect of the use of joint teams of police officers to investigate fraudulent transactions within the United Kingdom arising from the receipt of funds from the European Union. [85674]

Kate Hoey: The draft Convention on mutual assistance on criminal matters between the Member States of the European Union includes a provision on joint investigation teams. This would provide for co-operation between the competent authorities of the Member States, including judicial, police and customs authorities, in the use of joint investigation teams to carry out criminal investigations in one or more Member States. The provision applies to criminal activities in general, and does not refer specifically to financial fraud affecting European Union funds. The detail of this provision is subject to further negotiation.

European Treaties

Mr. Mitchell: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will list in respect of the new Strategic Committee on Immigration, Frontiers and Asylum concerned with matters arising from Title IV of Articles 61 to 69 of the consolidated Treaty on the European Community, the policy of Her Majesty's Government concerning those matters in respect of which by virtue of Protocol 4 of the Treaty of Amsterdam the United Kingdom has no current obligation; if representatives of Her Majesty's Government may participate in consideration of those matters; and, in respect of Article 3 of Protocol 4 of the Amsterdam Treaty enabling the United Kingdom or Ireland to enter into obligations not yet made, what consultation and scrutiny procedures will be adopted prior to such notification to the President of the Council. [86227]

Kate Hoey: I refer my hon. Friend to the reply given by my right hon. Friend the Home Secretary to the right hon. Member for Penrith and The Border (Mr. Maclean) on 12 March 1999, *Official Report*, columns *380–82*, concerning future United Kingdom participation in the

new Free Movement Chapter (Title IV, Articles 61–69 of the consolidated version of the Treaty establishing the European Community).

As a member of the Council, the United Kingdom will be able to participate fully in the discussion of all measures proposed under the Free Movement Chapter, both in the new Strategic Committee on Immigration, Frontiers and Asylum and in Council working groups, but the United Kingdom will not have a vote on measures in which it is not participating.

All new proposals under the Free Movement Chapter will be deposited for Parliamentary scrutiny, according to the rules governing First Pillar business. The subsequent Explanatory Memorandum will indicate whether or not it is intended to participate in the measure in accordance with Articles 3 or 4 of the Protocol on the position of the United Kingdom and Ireland.

Sexual Offences Review

Mr. Pike: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will list all those organisations which made a submission to his Department's sexual offences review; and if these submissions are publicly available. [85928]

Mr. Boateng: A full list of organisations who have made a submission to the sex offences review as at 27 May 1999 is as follows:

CROP (Coalition for the Removal of Pimping)
FFLAG (Families & Friends of Lesbians & Gays)
Lesbian & Gay Christians
APAG (Amhurst Park Action Group)
ILPS (Inner London Probation Service)
London Monday Group for Homosexual Equality
Grimsby & Scunthorpe Rape Crisis
University of Cambridge Institute of Criminology
South Essex Rape & Incest Crisis Centre
Gay & Lesbian Humanist Association
Trades Union Congress
Justice for Children
Campaign Against Censorship
Harrogate & District Women's Aid
The Maudsley Hospital
Rape Crisis (North Staffordshire & South Cheshire)
Josephine Butler Society
The Forensic Medicine Unit, St. George's Hospital Medical School
LAGER (Lesbian & Gay Employment Rights)
National Foster Care Association
National Society for Prevention of Cruelty to Children Area Children's Services, Preston
The Tizard Centre, University of Kent at Canterbury
CONTACT (National Association of Child Contact Centres)
BJFCS (British Juvenile & Family Court Society)
Sexual Freedom Coalition
NOTA (The National Organisation for the Treatment of Abusers)
The Magistrates' Association
The Raphael Centre
Jewish Care
GALOP
Naturists in Business
St. Helens & Knowsley Community Health (NHS) Trust, Learning Disability Directorate
Outrage!
UNISON
ILGA (International Lesbian & Gay Association)
Hounslow Rape & Crisis Support Group
Nottingham Rape Crisis Centre
LLGPI (London Lesbian & Gay Policing Initiative)
Stonewall
BLAGG (Bar Lesbian & Gay Group)
YWCA of Great Britain
Brighton & Hove Lesbian & Gay Community Centre
Liberty
Christians for Human Rights
School of Social Sciences, University of Teesside
Thames Valley Crime Intervention Service
London Borough of Hackney
Hull Women's Centre
National Union of Students Lesbian, Gay & Bisexual Campaign
Campaign for Homosexual Equality
Soroptomist International of Midland East
MACA (Mental After Care Association)
Metropolitan Police
Gay Men's Health Matters HIV Prevention Project
Open Door
West Yorkshire Lesbian Gay Bisexual & Transgendered Policing Initiative
Suzy Lamplugh Trust
Terrence Higgins Trust
National Aids Trust
The Royal College of Psychiatrists
The Diocese of Southwark
NSPCC
Legal Committee of the Joint Council of Her Majesty's Stipendiary Magistrates
BGWS (Boys & Girls Welfare Society)
Yorkshire MESMAC
Northern Ireland Gay Rights Association
Police Federation of England & Wales
Union of Liberal & Progressive Synagogues
MENCAP
Wyre Forest Women's Aid.

Dogs

Mr. Sutcliffe: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will list the *(a)* current and *(b)* proposed legislation relating to the ownership, breeding and keeping of dogs. [85761]

Mr. George Howarth: The following list is of primary legislation readily identified as containing provisions specific to dog breeding and ownership etc. Broader legislation, concerning other types of animal as well as dogs (for example, relating more generally to animal cruelty), has not been included.

Current legislation:

Metropolitan Police Act 1839 (section 54)
Town Police Clauses Act 1847 (section 28)
Dogs Act 1871
Dogs (Protection of Livestock) Act 1953

Animal Boarding Establishment Act 1963
Animals Act 1971
Breeding of Dogs Act 1973
Guard Dogs Act 1975
Animal Health Act 1981
Dangerous Dogs Act 1989
Environmental Protection Act 1990 (sections 149 and 150)
Dangerous Dogs Act 1991
Breeding of Dogs Act 1991
Control of Dogs Order 1992
Dogs (Fouling of Land) Act 1996
Dangerous Dogs (Amendment) Act 1997

Proposed legislation:

Breeding and Sale of Dogs (Welfare) Bill.

WALES

Organic Farming

Mr. Barry Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales what research he has commissioned into organic production techniques. [84358]

Mr. Jon Owen Jones: None. The research budget is administered by MAFF on behalf of England and Wales. Welsh views are reflected in the programme of work commissioned by MAFF. In 1999–2000 over £2 million will be spent on organic R&D in England and Wales. Most of this is aimed at studying the economic and practical problems of converting to, and maintaining, organic systems. It thus supports the overall objective of expanding production.

Child Protection Register

Mr. Cox: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales how many children in Wales who are registered with local authorities are registered on the child protection register; and if he will make a statement. [85118]

Mr. Jon Owen Jones: As at 31 March 1998, there were 2,473 children on child protection registers in Wales. Figures on the proportion of these which are looked after by local authorities are not held centrally. The Government are taking a number of steps to improve child protection arrangements, including revising the multi-agency guidance, "Working Together Under the Children Act 1989", which will be published later this year. In Wales, this will be subject to the agreement of the National Assembly. Child protection figures for 1999 will be available in the Autumn.

National Assembly (Elections Advertising)

Mr. Evans: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales if he will publish a breakdown of his Department's budget for advertising the elections to the National Assembly for Wales. [85511]

Mr. Michael: The Welsh Office budget for the National Assembly Information Campaign is £2 million. Expenditure to date breaks down as follows:

Integrated media (including press and television advertising, events and promotion): £1,196,274
Publications and internet: £333,367
Research: £134,246
Miscellaneous: £12,099.

I am pleased to say that there was cross party support for the campaign to encourage people to vote. As the turnout demonstrates, there is some way to go in persuading people that voting in an Assembly election is important for them and their families.

Agriculture Secretary

Mr. Evans: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales what representations he has received about the appointment of the Agriculture Secretary of the National Assembly for Wales. [85514]

Mr. Michael: Christine Gwyther and I had a meeting with representatives of farmers and the agriculture industry in Wales on 24 May. During the first part of the meeting comments were made about her appointment as Agriculture and Rural Affairs Secretary and the FUW president then left. The meeting went on to discuss numerous issues affecting farmers in Wales. Mrs. Gwyther has also received numerous letters congratulating her on her appointment and inviting her to several agricultural events over the next few months.

There has been a wide welcome for the fact that I have appointed an Assembly Secretary with specific responsibility for farming and the rural economy to reflect the importance of these issues in Wales. I am sure that farmers generally will judge the appointment on how well she does the job and will be encouraged by the appointment of someone who has direct experience of the need to promote and develop the rural economy.

Nuclear Waste

Ms Lawrence: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales if he will make a statement on the responsibilities of the First Secretary of the National Assembly for Wales over issues directly related to disposal or storage of nuclear waste in Wales when that waste does not originate in Wales. [85662]

Mr. Jon Owen Jones: From 1 July, the National Assembly will assume a range of functions under both planning and environmental legislation. This will include power to call in applications for planning consent or for environmental authorisations, and the determination of appeals against decisions made by local authorities or the Environment Agency. The Assembly will also be responsible for guidance to local planning authorities and the Environment Agency, and will have power to issue directions to either. The Environment Agency will be under a statutory duty to consult the National Assembly before granting any authorisation to dispose of radioactive waste on or from a nuclear site in Wales. The Assembly's exercise of these functions will relate to waste disposal in Wales, whether or not the waste originates in Wales.

The extent to which these responsibilities are delegated to the First Secretary is a matter for the National Assembly.

NHS Budgets

Mr. Lansley: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales what is the budgeted *(a)* surplus and *(b)* deficit for each (i) NHS authority and (ii) NHS trust in Wales for the financial year 1999–2000. [86034]

Mr. Jon Owen Jones: I regret the information requested is not yet available. Health authorities and trusts are still assessing their financial position in light of the recently issued cash allocation letter and the outcome of their negotiations on long term agreements. I will write to the hon. Member in July once the NHS Directorate has received details of its projected in-year financial position.

Following the transfer of functions order, this issue will be a matter for the National Assembly.

SCOTLAND

Skye Bridge

Mr. Charles Kennedy: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland (1) if he will refer the correspondence between the Crown Office and the Procurator Fiscal in Dingwall of 6 November 1995 in respect of the Skye Bridge to the Privy Council; and if he will make a statement; [84337]

(2) when the letter of 6 November 1995 from the Crown Office to the Procurator Fiscal in Dingwall, concerning the prosecution of Skye Bridge cases, will be made publicly available; and if he will make a statement. [84338]

Dr. Reid: This is now the responsibility of the Lord Advocate, who will address the points the hon. Member has raised and will respond by letter in due course. A copy will be placed in the Library of the House.

Child Protection

Mr. Cox: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland how many children in Scotland who are registered with local authorities are registered on the Child Protection Register; and if he will make a statement. [85087]

Mr. Macdonald: Child Protection Registers are maintained in all local authority areas in Scotland. It is estimated that on 31 March 1998, a total of 2,236 children were recorded on these Registers.

From 1 July 1999, this will be a matter for the Scottish Parliament.

Student Funding

Mr. Peter Atkinson: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland what the level of per capita funding budgeted for students is in the current financial year in the Borders Region in *(a)* primary schools and *(b)* secondary schools. [85448]

Mr. Macdonald *[holding answer 25 May 1999]:* Information about budgeted school running costs is given in "Scottish Schools: Costs 1996/97 to 1998/99" published by the Audit Unit of HM Inspectors of Schools, which is available in the House of Commons Library. Information for the current financial year is not yet available.

From 1 July 1999, this will be a matter for the Scottish Parliament.

St. Kilda

Mr. Matthew Taylor: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland what response the Government have made to the World Heritage Committee's concerns regarding the environmental protection of St. Kilda. [85673]

Mr. Macdonald: I have arrange for a copy of the Government's response to the UNESCO World Heritage Committee to be placed in the Library of the House.

HEALTH

Waiting Lists

18. **Mr. Clappison:** To ask the Secretary of State for Health which health authorities have asked trusts to increase out-patient consultation times for waiting list surgery; and if he will make a statement. [85015]

Mr. Denham: We are not aware of any health authorities asking trusts to increase waiting times for out-patient consultations. We are, however, aware that health authorities are expecting the National Health Service to see over a third of a million more new out-patients in 1999–2000 than last year.

Miss Widdecombe: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how many patients were waiting more than 13 weeks for an out-patient consultation in the last quarter for which figures are available. [85762]

Mr. Denham: At 31 March 1999, the number of patients still waiting for a first out-patient appointment more than 13 weeks after general practitioner referral was 456,033.

Miss Widdecombe: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will list the health authorities which have asked general practitioners to reduce the number of patients they refer to hospitals for waiting list surgery. [86065]

Mr. Denham: We are not aware of any health authorities asking general practitioners to reduce the number of patients they refer to hospitals for out-patient appointments.

We do, however, expect all health authorities and primary care groups to regularly discuss with GPs arrangements for ensuring patients receive the treatment they need, as quickly as possible. This is key to improving health, reducing inequalities and modernising National Health Service services.

27. **Mr. Whittingdale:** To ask the Secretary of State for Health how many patients have been removed from central health service waiting list statistics since 2 May 1997, without having received the treatment intended. [85024]

Mr. Denham: Patients are removed from waiting lists for a number of reasons other than treatment. These are:

(i) patient admitted as an emergency for the same condition;

(ii) patient removed for other reasons, such as a patient being transferred to another trust's waiting list;

(iii) patient/doctor decides operation is no longer needed (for example—patient recovering from illness);

(iv) patient treated elsewhere (for example, at a private provider);

(v) patient died.

The number of patients removed from waiting lists in 1998–99 totalled 672,000. This is broadly in line with the proportion removed from the waiting list in recent years.

Dental Services

19. **Mrs. Anne Campbell:** To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will make a statement about trends in the number of NHS dentists providing services over the last five years. [85016]

Mr. Denham: The general trend in the number of General Dental Service (GDS) dentists in England has been upwards, with the number of GDS dentists increasing by about 400 to 500 a year since 1996.

School Medical Services

20. **Mr. Corbett:** To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will consult with health authorities on the role of school medical services in improving the health of children and young people. [85017]

Mr. Hutton: Our agenda for improving the health of the population recognises the need to focus attention on children's mental, physical and emotional health care needs. The school medical services will have a major role to play. We are introducing many important policy initiatives which will depend on effective health service input to schools and nurseries; these include the "Healthy Schools" initiative, "Sure Start" and "Quality Protects". Health authorities and other key players will, of course, be consulted.

Camden and Islington Health Action Zone

21. **Mr. Corbyn:** To ask the Secretary of State for Health what meetings he has held with local officials on the progress of the Camden and Islington health action zone. [85018]

Mr. Denham: My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State has not had meetings with local Health Authority officials on the progress of the Camden and Islington Health Action Zone (HAZ). However, I and my Ministerial colleagues will be visiting all the newly established second wave HAZs, including Camden and Islington, in due course.

General Practitioners (Sunderland)

23. **Mr. Mullin:** To ask the Secretary of State for Health what plans he has to increase the number of general practitioners in Sunderland; and if he will make a statement. [85020]

Mr. Denham: The Government have introduced a number of national policy measures to improve the recruitment of general practitioners, which Sunderland Health Authority has been implementing locally. The Health Authority introduced a Career Start Scheme and has successfully recruited four salaried GPs. The Priority Healthcare Wearside NHS Trust, Sunderland Health Authority, the University of Sunderland and the City of Sunderland Council have developed proposals for a second-wave personal medical services pilot.

Nurse:Patient Ratio

24. **Mr. Brake:** To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will make a statement on the ratio of nurses to patients in the NHS. [85021]

Mr. Denham: With the additional funding announced in July last year, the NHS should be able to employ up to 15,000 more nurses by the year 2002.

Waiting Times

26. **Mr. Jack:** To ask the Secretary of State for Health what research his Department is undertaking into factors affecting hospital out-patients waiting times. [85023]

Mr. Denham: The Department is committed to undertaking a major research programme to improve our understanding of factors affecting both in-patient and out-patient waiting lists and times.

Research projects already agreed include an evaluation of the National Booked Admissions Programme and a review of research evidence on strategies to improve the appropriateness of general practitioner referrals.

Health Authority Funding (Rural Areas)

28. **Mr. Drew:** To ask the Secretary of State for Health what plans he has to revise the current funding mechanism for health authorities to take account of factors specific to rural areas. [85025]

Mr. Denham: Last November, we announced a review of the formula used to make cash allocations to health authorities and primary care groups. The review will cover a wide range of issues, including factors relating to rural areas.

Hospital Administration (Greater London)

29. **Mr. Wilkinson:** To ask the Secretary of State for Health what responsibilities for hospital administration the Eastern Regional Executive of the National Health Service retains in Greater London. [85026]

Mr. Denham: The Eastern Regional Office of the National Health Service Executive has overall responsibility for Mount Vernon and Watford Hospitals NHS Trust. Mount Vernon Hospital is in Greater London and the management of its local acute services will transfer to Hillingdon Hospital NHS Trust with effect from 1 July. Hillingdon Hospital Trust comes under the London Regional Office.

Plastics surgery and burns and cancer services will continue to be managed by the Mount Vernon and Watford Hospitals NHS Trust. These are the subject of reviews on how best these services can be delivered to a wide population in the Eastern, London and South East regions.

Smoking

30. **Ms Drown:** To ask the Secretary of State for Health what discussions he has had with broadcasters on reducing the depiction of smoking on television; and if he will make a statement. [85028]

Ms Jowell: We plan to discuss this with the broadcasters or regulators as part of a developing campaign. The regulatory codes give guidance about the

depiction of smoking and drinking in programmes. They should not include smoking or drinking unless the context or dramatic veracity require it. Particular care is needed with programmes likely to be seen by children, and smoking should not be shown as an attractive or normal activity in pre-watershed programmes. Tobacco advertising is banned from television.

Osteoporosis

31. **Mr. Sawford:** To ask the Secretary of State for Health what funds his Department has allocated to services to tackle osteoporosis. [85029]

Ms Jowell: The Department does not specify what proportion of health authorities' funding allocations is to be spent on services to tackle osteoporosis. It is for health authorities, in partnership with National Health Service trusts, primary care groups, local authorities and local stakeholders, to determine how best to use their funds to meet national and local priorities for improving health and modernising services. The additional resources of at least 5.45 per cent. cash increase to all health authorities for 1999–2000 will help them in this.

HIV

32. **Mr. Russell Brown:** To ask the Secretary of State for Health what plans he has to ensure that health authorities use the HIV prevention special allocation in ways appropriate to the epidemiology of HIV. [85030]

Ms Jowell: The forthcoming guidance to health authorities on the use of HIV and AIDS special allocations re-emphasises the need to match funding to local epidemiology. The guidance also highlights the latest supporting epidemiological data on HIV prevalence nationally, which reinforces the target groups identified in the current HIV Health promotion strategy, which are: gay men, bisexual men, and other men who have sex with men; men and women who travel to, or have family links with, high prevalence countries where the predominant mode of transmission is sex between men and women, currently in sub-Saharan Africa, people diagnosed with HIV and AIDS and injecting drug users.

The Department is developing a new strategy on HIV/AIDS, which will also address the issue of targeting of HIV prevention activity towards the most vulnerable groups. Authorities are required to submit end-of-year reports on the use of HIV prevention funds in advance of their full annual AIDS (Control) Act Reports. The format of these reports is also due to be reviewed as part of the strategy development work.

General Practitioners

33. **Mr. Llwyd:** To ask the Secretary of State for Health what plans he has to employ more salaried general practitioners in the national health service; and if he will make a statement. [85031]

Mr. Denham: The Salaried Doctors Scheme continues to have our full support. It is designed to allow health authorities to make sensible and locally appropriate prioritisation of cash-limited monies.

Dental Services (Scarborough and Whitby)

34. **Mr. Quinn:** To ask the Secretary of State for Health what steps he is taking to promote and safeguard national health service dentistry in Scarborough and Whitby; and if he will make a statement. [85032]

Mr. Denham: Three Investing in Dentistry proposals from Scarborough were approved to enable 9,700 new National Health Service patients to register. North Yorkshire Health Authority also has approval to employ a salaried dentist in Scarborough. The Personal Dental Services scheme, and our forthcoming strategy for NHS dentistry, will provide the framework for future improvements in NHS dental services.

Primary Care

35. **Ms Blears:** To ask the Secretary of State for Health how many applications for beacon status his Department has received from primary care projects. [85033]

Mr. Denham: Over 550 nominations have been put forward for Primary Care Beacon status.

Sir Sydney Chapman: To ask the Secretary of State for Health (1) what are the estimated administration costs, including remuneration of members, of the primary care groups in the Greater London Area for their first year of operation; [85549]

(2) what is the total estimated cost of the primary care groups in the Greater London Area in their first year of operation; and what is the administration cost net of existing costs being transferred. [85550]

Mr. Denham: An individual primary care group's share of its overall health authority management costs budget will depend upon its population size, level of devolved responsibility and organisational structure of the individual PCGs and their HAs. The PCG will have negotiated its share of the overall HA/PCG management costs with its host health authority alongside their discussions on the delegation of function or responsibilities for 1999–2000. Information on the split of management costs funding between PCGs and HAs is currently being validated and will be available shortly.

Social Services (Children)

36. **Mr. Ben Chapman:** To ask the Secretary of State for Health how many action plans have been approved by his Department to help local authorities improve their performance in the provision of social services for children in need. [85034]

Mr. Hutton: I refer my hon. Friend to the reply I gave my hon. Friend the Member for Basildon (Angela Smith) on 13 April 1999, *Official Report*, column *114*.

Dental Services (Cornwall)

Mr. Breed: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what plans he has to improve NHS dental services in Cornwall. [85008]

Mr. Denham: The first wave of Personal Dental Services, which started in October 1998, included a new service in Cornwall. This service enables anyone who is not registered with a National Health Service dentist to get treatment for their dental problems.

Ten Investing in Dentistry funding requests have also been approved giving over 33,000 patients the opportunity of registering with an NHS dentist.

Nurses' Pay

Mr. Loughton: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what representations he has received regarding the late payment of the nurses' pay award. [85019]

Mr. Denham: Authorisation to implement the pay increase was sent to National Health Service employers on 8 April, earlier than in the previous three years. We have received a small number of letters regarding this issue, 20 to date. No representations have been received from trades unions and professional organisations representing nurses and midwives.

Mr. Brady: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will list those National Health Service trusts which will not pay the increased pay award to nurses in their pay packets for May 1999. [86083]

Mr. Lansley: To ask the Secretary of State for Health which NHS trusts have failed to implement the nurses' pay award for 1999–2000 in time for the end of May pay arrangements. [86035]

Mr. Denham: I refer the hon. Members to the reply given to the hon. Member for Altrincham and Sale (Mr. Brady) on 25 May 1999, *Official Report*, column *114*.

Health Action Zone (South Yorkshire)

Ms Rosie Winterton: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what progress is being made in implementing the health action zone in the South Yorkshire area. [85022]

Mr. Denham: The South Yorkshire Health Action Zone is making good progress as it has moved into its second year of operation. A detailed range of outcome measures have been agreed for the three main programme areas: improving the health of children and young people: improving heart health in the general population; and enabling those with physical and sensory disabilities in later life to lead more independent lives.

Discrimination against Doctors

Mr. McDonnell: To ask the Secretary of State for Health (1) what discussions he has had with the General Medical Council on the evidence produced by the Medical Practitioners Union on the need for safeguards to prevent racially motivated complaints against doctors reaching the Professional Conduct Committee of the General Medical Council; [84725]

(2) what action he has taken to address the concerns of the Medical Practitioners Union that the disciplinary procedures in the medical profession may discriminate against doctors from ethnic minorities. [84723]

Mr. Denham: The Government are fully committed to equality of opportunity for all Health Service staff and are concerned that the National Health Service work force should reflect the population it serves in order to deliver sensitive and appropriate services. There is no place for discrimination on any grounds within the National Health Service.

Officials work closely with the General Medical Council on the handling of complaints and to ensure that any differences in referral rates or handling of cases are considered and addressed where appropriate.

NHS Costs

Mr. Simon Hughes: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will list *(a)* the administrative cost of the NHS by region and *(b)* the cost of publicity and public relations of the NHS by region in the last year for which figures are available. [84830]

Mr. Denham: The table provides information on National Health Service management costs in health authorities and NHS trusts, by region for 1996–97. Information on 1997–98 expenditure on NHS management costs will be published shortly.

	NHS management costs 1996–97
Northern and Yorkshire	210,357
Trent	158,607
Anglia and Oxford	160,475
North Thames	294,149
South Thames	265,615
South and West	193,069
West Midlands	174,397
Northern and Yorkshire	219,131
England	1,675,800

Notes:

1. Excludes expenditure on general practitioner fundholder practice fund management allowances
2. Figures in £000

Expenditure on publicity and public relations is not collected centrally as a specific item. Information about NHS expenditure on advertising is given in the following table. It includes expenditure in a number of different areas, including recruitment advertising, health promotion initiatives, and measures to improve local accountability such as the production of annual reports and information about services.

	Advertising expenditure in trusts and health authorities 1997–98
Northern and Yorkshire	4,694,683
Trent	4,212,484
Anglia and Oxford	5,302,599
North Thames	11,084,233
South Thames	8,428,801
South and West	5,739,418
West Midlands	4,789,712
Northern and Yorkshire	4,558,358

Source:

Financial Returns of Trusts and Health Authorities 1996–97 to 1997–98.

Correspondence

Fiona Mactaggart: To ask the Secretary of State for Health when he expects to reply to the letter of 10 February from the hon. Member for Slough to the Minister of State about the funding of health care in Slough. [84976]

Mr. Denham: I replied to my hon. Friend on 25 May 1999.

Mr. McLoughlin: To ask the Secretary of State for Health when the hon. Member for West Derbyshire will receive a reply to his letter of 12 February and reminder of 19 March concerning his constituent, Mr. Duncan Beresford of Steeple Grange, Wirksworth, Derbyshire. [85557]

Mr. Denham: I replied to the hon. Member on 3 June.

Mr. McLoughlin: To ask the Secretary of State for Health when the hon. Member for West Derbyshire will receive a reply to his letter of 22 February concerning his constituent, Mr. Mark Cambell Lloyd, of Oak Drive, Doveridge, Derbyshire. [85558]

Mr. Denham: I replied to the hon. Member on 3 June 1999.

Mr. Paice: To ask the Secretary of State for Health when he expects to answer the letter from the hon. Member for South-East Cambridgeshire, dated 12 November 1998, regarding his constituent Mr. D. Coombes and the drug Beta Interferon. [85336]

Mr. Denham: I replied to the hon. Member on 25 May 1999.

Child Protection

Mr. Cox: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how many children in England who are registered with local authorities are registered on the Child Protection Register; and if he will make a statement. [85086]

Mr. Hutton: At 31 March 1998, there were 31,600 children and young people on child protection registers in England. At 31 March 1998, 8,000 (25 per cent. of those on the register) were looked after by local authorities. The purpose of the register is to provide a record of all children in the area who are considered to be suffering from or likely to suffer significant harm and who are currently the subject of an inter-agency protection plan.

Dentistry

Mr. Kidney: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will make a statement on the contribution that NHS dentistry will make to the Government's objective of improving public health. [85091]

Mr. Denham: The Government's dental strategy, to be published soon, will set out the valuable contribution that dentists and dentistry can make to a healthier nation and a modern and dependable National Health Service.

Prostate Cancer

Mr. Coaker: To ask the Secretary of State for Health (1) what progress is being made in the development of services for *(a)* the prevention and *(b)* the treatment of prostate cancer; [85323]

(2) what plans he has for developments in the treatment of prostate cancer; [85325]

(3) what steps are being taken to educate men about the possible early signs of prostate cancer; [85324]

(4) what assessment he has made of likely trends in the incidence of prostate cancer in men over the next five years; and if he will make a statement. [85322]

Mr. Hutton: There are about 15,000 cases and 8,000 deaths each year from prostate cancer. Over the latest five-year period for which data is available (1987–92), incidence rates for prostate cancer for men of all ages increased by 25 per cent. in England. However, past trends do not necessarily predict future changes.

The Government are committed to improving the prevention, detection and treatment of prostate cancer. There is, as yet, no consensus of medical opinion about the correct management of early localised tumours. The choice is between radical prostatectomy and radiotherapy. The Health Technology Assessment programme has already funded two systematic reviews of the diagnosis and management of prostate cancer and the National Co-ordinating Centre for the HTA programme is commissioning a £200,000 study at the University of Bristol on the feasibility of conducting a multi-centre randomised trial of treatment for localised prostate cancer.

On 20 May my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister set out a plan of action to prevent, diagnose and treat cancer. As well as £60 million invested directly into services for breast, bowel and lung cancer, the Prime Minister announced an additional £150 million of lottery money to support a new programme of cancer prevention, detection, treatment and care over the next three years.

The Department provides advice to the public, in leaflets and through health education campaigns, which advise on signs of possible cancer and encourage early reporting of these to a general practitioner or other health professionals. This includes providing funding for promotional material used within the United Kingdom for the "Europe Against Cancer" programme. A different cancer-related theme is chosen each year. The theme for 1998 was "Cancer in Men".

Dr. Gibson: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what progress he has made in targeting resources on prostate cancer treatment. [85002]

Mr. Hutton: The Government are committed to improving the prevention, detection and treatment of prostate cancer. The Health Technology Assessment (HTA) programme has already funded two systematic reviews of the diagnosis and management of prostate cancer and the National Co-ordinating Centre for the HTA programme is commissioning a £200,000 study at the University of Bristol looking at the feasibility of conducting a multi-centre randomised trail of treatment for localised prostate cancer.

Health Inequalities

Mr. Hesford: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what assessment his Department has made of current levels of health inequalities in England; and if he will make a statement. [85316]

Ms Jowell: The Department uses the Health Survey for England, information from the Office for National Statistics and a range of other data collated in the Public Health Common Data Set produced by the National Centre for Health Outcomes Development.

The Government set up an independent inquiry, led by Sir Donald Acheson, which used information from these sources and elsewhere to look specifically at health inequalities. The report of this inquiry was

published on 26 November 1998. We have welcomed Sir Donald's report and will publish shortly an action report summarising Government activity to tackle health inequalities alongside the White Paper on our health strategy.

Reducing health inequalities was a main priority in the Green Paper "Our Healthier Nation" and is also a shared priority for health and social services in National Priorities Guidance that we issued last year. Health inequalities will be a key focus of Health Improvement programmes which are being developed at local level.

Uranium Resources

Dr. Iddon: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what assessment he has made of the adequacy of stocks of highly enriched uranium for the treatment of cancer patients; and if he will list those hospitals experiencing difficulty in obtaining supplies. [71679]

Mr. Hutton: The supply of highly enriched uranium is kept under review. To date no difficulties have been reported by hospitals.

Professional Statisticians

Mr. Menzies Campbell: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how many staff who have worked as professional statisticians in his Department have left on early retirement in each of the past 10 years. [81190]

Mr. Denham: Eight professional statisticians have left on early retirement in the last ten years.

GPs (Elderly Patients)

Dr. Cable: To ask the Secretary of State for Health (1) what monitoring mechanisms are in place to ensure that vulnerable older people receive services from their general practitioners; [85498]

(2) what requirement is placed upon general practitioners to contact older people who have not been in touch with their general practitioner in the past year because of mobility problems and frailty; [85504]

(3) what proportion of people aged 75 years and over have annual health checks with their general practitioner. [85487]

Mr. Denham: Under their terms of service, general practitioners are required to invite all patients who have reached the age of 75 for an annual health check in the patient's home, or in the surgery if the patient prefers. General practitioners make arrangements with health authorities to provide services and regional offices of the National Health service Executive hold health authorities to account for the services provided in their area. Information is not held centrally on the numbers of those accepting the invitation for an annual health check.

DTP Vaccine

Mr. Ian Stewart: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what steps have been taken to alert NHS trusts who have been issued with the batch of DTP vaccine which was recently withdrawn by Bath and West Community NHS Trust following adverse reactions. [85495]

Ms Jowell: A Public Health Link message was sent from the Chief Medical Officer's office on 14 May 1999 to all directors of public health and copied to all consultants in communicable disease control for urgent cascade to District immunisation co-ordinators, health authority pharmaceutical advisers, medical directors in national health service trusts to forward to chief pharmacists, and on to Community service pharmacists and to general practitioners who received the original message. Copies of the Public Health Link message are available in the Library.

The reports were of cases from one area and were not reflected in reports of reactions to the same batch from other parts of the country.

Epsom and St. Helier NHS Trusts

Mr. Burstow: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will make it his policy to provide financial support to the Epsom and St. Helier NHS Trust to develop a recovery plan; and if he will make a statement. [85726]

Mr. Denham: The Epsom and St. Helier National Health Service Trust is currently in discussion with the NHS Executive regarding its financial plan for 1999–2000.

Vaccines (Bovine Material)

Mr. Baker: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what assessment he has made of the implications for human health of the use of vaccines which in their early stage of manufacture had used bovine material prohibited for use in human food. [85492]

Ms Jowell *[holding answer 26 May 1999]:* The Committee on the Safety of Medicines (established under Section 4 of the Medicines Act 1968 to advise the licensing authority on the safety, quality and efficacy of medicinal products) established a working party in 1989 to consider the implications of bovine spongiform encephalopathy for all medicines, including those which used bovine material in their early stages of manufacture. An assessment was made by the working party of all licensed medicinal products using bovine material, including vaccines. No risk to human health has been established from use of bovine material in the manufacture of medicinal products, but as a precautionary measure, manufacturers were required to switch to use of bovine material sourced from outside the United Kingdom, and to comply with guidelines on the sourcing and processing of bovine material for use in the manufacture of medicinal products.

Electro-physiological Technologists

Mr. Field: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what review he is undertaking of the pay of electro-physiological technologists within the NHS; and to which pay review body he intends to allocate these workers for future pay reviews. [85515]

Mr. Denham: On February 15 1999, the Health Department published proposals for modernising the National Health Service pay system in "Agenda for Change". This included the possibility of moving some highly qualified health professionals into the remit of the Nurses, Midwives, Health Visitors and Professions Allied to Medicine Review Body.

Discussions have recently opened between representatives of NHS trade unions and management representatives from NHS employers and the four Health Departments on the basis of our proposals for modernising the NHS pay system. We will develop the proposed changes in a spirit of partnership.

It is too early to comment on proposals for specific staff groups.

Staffordshire Ambulance Service

Mr. Jenkins: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what recent representations he has received from *(a)* organisations, *(b)* hon. Members and *(c)* others about the response rate times achieved by Staffordshire Ambulance Service. [85535]

Mr. Hutton: We have received no representations in the last six months about Staffordshire Ambulance Service's response times.

Child Migrant Trust

Mr. Paul Marsden: To ask the Secretary of State for Health when the first payment from the travel fund for the Child Migrant Trust will be made; and if he will make a statement. [85654]

Mr. Hutton: The travel Support Fund for former child migrants is administered by the International Social Service, who will purchase travel tickets on a child migrant's behalf. A daily allowance is then paid to the child migrant for up to 14 days spent in this country. The first assisted child migrant arrived in the United Kingdom in the week beginning 31 May.

The Child Migrants Trust receive a central grant towards the tracing and counselling services which they provide for former child migrants. This is paid quarterly, the first payment having been made at the beginning of May.

NICE (Work Programme)

Mr. Paul Marsden: To ask the Secretary of State for Health, pursuant to his answer of 19 May 1999, *Official Report*, column *376*, on cancer, which new and existing technologies are being considered for the National Institute for Clinical Excellence's work programme; and if he will make a statement. [85660]

Mr. Denham: Ministers will be announcing shortly a number of new and existing technologies which will be referred to the National Institute for Clinical Excellence as part of its first year's work programme. Cancer treatments are amongst those under consideration.

Strokes

Mr. Öpik: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what actions his Department intends to take in order to assist people suffering from the after effects of strokes. [85512]

Mr. Hutton: The National Service Framework for Older People was launched in November 1998, and will focus on those parts of the National Health Service that are particularly important to older people. Stroke care is one of the key issues it will consider. This work will set national standards and define service models, put in place strategies to support implementation, and establish performance measures against which progress within an agreed time scale can be measured.

In addition, the Department is funding other initiatives on stroke, including a sentinel audit of stroke services, the development of Clinical Guidelines on stroke rehabilitation and the revision of the Effective Health Care Bulletin on stroke rehabilitation.

Children's Rights

Mr. Beith: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will make a statement on his Department's progress in implementing the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child. [86123]

Mr. Hutton: The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child provides comprehensive coverage of a wide range of children's rights for implementation by States Parties. The Convention requires that a comprehensive report on the progress of implementation is prepared at regular intervals. The second United Kingdom report covering the period 1993–1998 will be published soon.

Residential Nursing Homes

Mr. Clifton-Brown: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how many council-managed residential and nursing homes have been closed in the Leeds, Central constituency in the last two years; how many people were affected; and what the cost was of the closures including the relocation of the occupants. [85707]

Mr. Hutton: Details of home closures and the attached costs are not collected centrally. We understand, however, that Leeds City Council manages 25 residential care homes for older people and that over the last two years four homes were closed. These homes accommodated 163 people. For further details on location, costs and any alternative arrangements made, the hon. Member may wish to contact the local authority direct.

Trade Unions

Mr. Cohen: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will list the dates since 1 January on which he has had official meetings with representatives of *(a)* UNISON, *(b)* MSF, *(c)* RCN, *(d)* BMA, *(e)* RCM, *(f)* professions allied to medicine and *(g)* other trade unions; and if he will make a statement on his policy on when (i) to meet trade unions and (ii) to speak at their annual conferences. [86022]

Mr. Denham: My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State met with the Royal College of Nursing on 28 January 1999, the Royal College of Midwives on 4 February 1999 and the British Medical Association on 11 May 1999. He also met with the Trades Union Congress health service unions on 16 March 1999 and attended UNISON's conference in Brighton on 28 April 1999.

Ministers regularly meet representatives from trade unions and other professional bodies in a variety of forums to discuss matters of mutual interest.

NHS Budgets

Mr. Lansley: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will list the budgeted surplus or deficit for each (i) National Health Service authority and (ii) National Health Trust in England for the financial year 1999–2000. [86033]

Mr. Denham: The information requested will be available shortly and will be placed in the Library.

Medical Laboratory Scientific Officers

Mr. Laurence Robertson: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what plans he has to review the salary structure of state-registered medical laboratory scientific officers; and if he will make a statement. [85646]

Mr. Denham: The salary structure for medical laboratory scientific officers is negotiated in the Professional and Technical Staffs Whitley Council. The Council has been discussing MLSO pay in the light of reported recruitment and retention problems and will meet on 10 June to consider the National Health Service management side's offer to substantially improve the pay of Trainee MLSOs, MLSO1s and the starting pay of MLSO2s.

For the longer term, on 15 February 1999 the Health Departments published proposals for modernising the NHS pay system in "Agenda for Change". Discussions have opened between representatives from NHS employers, trades unions and the four Health Departments. We will develop the proposed changes in a spirit of partnership. Our aim is a pay system which gives employers effective ways of rewarding people for taking on more responsibility and developing new skills.

Royal Hospital, Haslar

Mr. Viggers: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how many letters he has received concerning the future of the Royal Hospital, Haslar; and of these, how many supported its closure and how many opposed it. [85552]

Mr. Denham: Since 14 December 1998, the Department has received around 1,500 letters from members of the public, councillors and local hon. Members on the future of the Royal Hospital, Haslar. All letters received have opposed the closure.

Drugs and Procedures (Rationing)

Miss Widdecombe: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will list the drugs or procedures which are currently rationed in the National Health Service. [86064]

Mr. Denham: No drugs or procedures are rationed in the National Health Service. Some procedures, such as drugs on the selected list scheme introduced by the Conservative Government, are restricted through central direction.

National Institute for Clinical Excellence

Mr. Burstow: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what assessment he has made of the impact which the National Institute for Clinical Excellence will have on regional variations in the delivery of health services. [85027]

Mr. Denham: The National Institute for Clinical Excellence (NICE) will issue clear and robust guidance that will seek to address regional variations in the provision of clinical and cost-effective treatments.

We are working with the professions to produce National Service Frameworks and clinical guidelines which will give us maximum national efficiency whilst still allowing for appropriate local and individual responsiveness.

We are determined to tackle "post-code prescribing" caused by the market approach to health care. NICE will provide a single source of reliable guidance about effectiveness, which will provide a sound basis for decision-making for the whole country.

TREASURY

Health Care Expenditure

Mr. Paul Marsden: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if he will list for each year from 1979 to date the percentage of GDP spent by the United Kingdom on *(a)* public healthcare, *(b)* private healthcare and *(c)* total healthcare; and if he will make a statement. [84858]

Mr. Milburn: The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development produces figures for public and total healthcare spending in member countries. Figures for the UK over the period requested are set out in the table. Private healthcare expenditure is taken as the difference between public and total healthcare expenditure.

Year	*Total healthcare expenditure as a percentage of GDP*	*Public healthcare expenditure as a percentage of GDP*	*Private healthcare expenditure as a percentage of GDP*
1979	5.3	4.7	0.6
1980	5.6	5.0	0.6
1981	5.9	5.3	0.6
1982	5.8	5.1	0.7
1983	6.0	5.2	0.8
1984	5.9	5.2	0.7
1985	5.9	5.0	0.9
1986	5.9	5.0	0.9
1987	5.9	5.0	0.9
1988	5.8	4.9	0.9
1989	5.8	4.9	0.9
1990	6.0	5.1	0.9
1991	6.5	5.4	1.1
1992	6.9	5.9	1.0
1993	6.9	5.8	1.1
1994	6.9	5.8	1.1
1995	6.9	5.8	1.1
1996	6.9	5.8	1.1
1997	6.7	5.7	1.0

Source:
OECD health databank 1998

Heavily Indebted Poor Countries Initiative

Ms Jenny Jones: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if he will make it his policy to support Oxfam's proposal of a human development window when reviewing the working of the HIPC initiative at the G8 summit. [85539]

Ms Hewitt: The Government's policy on debt relief was set out in a recent memorandum to the Select Committee for International Development. In that memorandum the Government emphasised the need to strengthen the link between debt relief and poverty reduction.

Debt Management Office

Ms Lawrence: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if he will publish the UK Debt Management Office's targets for 1999–2000. [86304]

Ms Hewitt: The DMO's targets for 1999–2000 are set out as follows, together with the outturn against the equivalent targets for 1998–99. The DMO is today also publishing its Corporate Overview and Business Plan for 1999–2000. I will arrange for a copy to be placed in the Library.

Targets for the Debt Management Office 1999–2000

1. To ensure full compliance with the Government's remit for the issuance of debt to finance the Central Government Net Cash Requirement as set out in the Debt Management Report within the tolerances and subject to the review triggers notified separately to the Office. *[Similar target met in 1998–99.]*

2. To ensure that the maximum time taken to issue the results of gilt auctions does not exceed 40 minutes while achieving complete accuracy. *[Same target met in 1998–99.]*

3. To establish with a view to introduction in Q4 1999 (unless market consultation recommends Q1 2000) a system for managing the Exchequer's aggregate cash position which achieves cost-effective financing and is operationally robust, properly conducted, legally sound and subject to minimal credit risk (to the satisfaction of an external assessor). *[Similar to 1998–99, but with revised deadline.]*

4. To achieve complete accuracy, within agreed accounting tolerance, in the recording and reporting of transactions through the Debt Management Account and in delivering money (and reconciling payments) to the NLF. *[Same target in 1998–99.]*

5. To acknowledge all letters from the public within nine working days and for at least 95 per cent. to be sent a substantive reply within four weeks. *[Comparable target met in 1998–99; acknowledgment target now shorter.]*

6. To achieve less than 10 breaches of the operational market notice (excluding any breaches that the Treasury accept were beyond the control of the Office). *[Comparable target met in 1998–99; target now reduced from 12 to 10—an operational notice covering cash management will be published in 1999.]*

7. To ensure that the qualifications that the NAO have made in respect of the Gilt-Edged Official Operations Account are satisfactorily addressed in the running and presentation of the Debt Management Account. *[Same target in 1998–99.]*

Birth Certificates

Mr. Malcolm Bruce: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if he will list those purposes for which his Department and its executive agencies require a birth certificate to be furnished by (i) employees, contractors or those applying for employment of contracts, and (ii) other persons. [85823]

Ms Hewitt: Each of the Chancellor's departments and agencies (HM Treasury, HM Customs and Excise, Inland Revenue, National Savings, Office for National Statistics, Royal Mint, Government Actuary, Debt Management Office and Valuation Office Agency) requires, as part of the Basic Check on new employees, some evidence of identity, age (for pensions purposes), and of the right to work in the UK. Such evidence depends upon whether or not the applicant is a UK or EC national but might be provided from a combination of different documents including a full British passport, P45, valid British driving licence, birth certificate, proof of residence at a given address, etc., or (where relevant) a full EC or other national passport; an identity card issued by an EC country; or other proof of immigration status and/or the right to work. Employees are also required to produce their birth certificate when undergoing Developed Vetting procedures (required when they will have constant access to Top Secret information and assets). Most departments also require contractors to make checks similar to the Basic Check on their employees. Birth certificates, as a means of identity, are not required to be furnished by other persons.

Personal Service Companies

Dr. Cable: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer (1) if information on certified agencies and other clients of personal service companies will be available through EDI to enable recruitment consultancies and others to check on a company's status; [86188]

(2) what requirements to report to the Inland Revenue will be placed on companies utilising personal service companies *(a)* via a certified agency and *(b)* independent of a certified agency; [86177]

(3) if the tax affairs of certified agencies for personal service companies will be handled through a central office; [86179]

(4) when the Inland Revenue plans to withdraw Decision 4 of February 1992 which makes it unnecessary for an agency to operate PAYE when a limited company is contracting with an agency to provide personal services; [86185]

(5) how self-certification of public service companies will apply in the case of companies with two streams of income, one within and the other outside the new rules; [86180]

(6) how the Inland Revenue will define costs which are incidental to the supply of materials and equipment in contracts for personal service companies; [86178]

(7) if non-certified agencies providing personal services will be given a tax code; [86183]

(8) how the retained profits of personal service companies will be treated by the Inland Revenue after April 2000; [86181]

(9) for what reasons Inland Revenue examples of the impact of tax changes affecting personal service companies do not include reference to agency workers; [86186]

(10) for what period directors of personal service companies who default on their certifications will be banned from self-certification; [86189]

(11) how legitimate expenses for personal service companies in respect of (i) professional indemnity and public liability insurance and (ii) training costs, will be handled for tax purposes. [86184]

Dawn Primarolo: The rules will not be finalised until consultation on the proposals is complete. The Inland Revenue will meet with representative bodies in June and are considering written representations from individuals. I have asked the Inland Revenue to publish details of the new rules in as near final form as possible, along with comprehensive guidance on the application of the rules, at the earliest possible stage.

Dr. Cable: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer how VAT will be applied to non-certified agencies supplying personal services when they have paid income tax and national insurance. [86182]

Dawn Primarolo: The VAT position of non-certified agencies will not be affected by the Inland Revenue proposals. VAT will continue to be due on the full value of the supplies made by the agencies, including income tax and national insurance deducted by the client.

Stability Pact Targets (Italy)

Dr. Cable: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer in which forum European Finance Ministers modified stability pact targets in relation to Italy. [85894]

Ms Hewitt: The 25 May ECOFIN agreed a draft text of the Board Economic Guidelines for Italy which reflects the possibility of lower than forecast growth in 1999 impacting on Italy's deficit.

Marriage Registrars

Mr. Cohen: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what plans he has to make regulations to amend the duty of marriage registrars to report suspicious marriages; and if he will make a statement. [86031]

Ms Hewitt: The Immigration and Asylum Bill places a duty on registrars to report to the Home Office marriages which they reasonably suspect to be sham marriages, and for reports to be made in such form and manner, and within a time period as may be set out in regulations. The Bill provides for these regulations to be made by the Registrar General with the approval of the Chancellor of the Exchequer.

BMARC

Mr. David Davis: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what were the results of the inquiry by HM Customs and Excise set up in June 1995 into the allegations that directors of BMARC had condoned or participated in the illegal export of naval cannon to Iran; and if he will make a statement. [85920]

Dawn Primarolo: As the enforcement authority for export controls, Customs investigated the allegations but found no evidence that would support a prosecution against any of the directors of BMARC.

Taxation

Mr. Gibb: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if he will list the assumptions for household spending and council tax payment which were used in the answer to the right hon. Member for Edinburgh, Central (Mr. Darling) of 11 December 1996, *Official Report*, columns *190–202*. [85912]

Dawn Primarolo: The written answer of 11 December 1996 was given by the previous Government. It would be inappropriate for me to seek to explain the assumptions on which it was based, beyond what was said at the time by the Minister concerned.

Training Allowance

Mr. Healey: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if a training allowance paid to a trainee, who is not receiving an unemployment-related benefit whilst on a European Social Fund course of training, is subject to *(a)* income tax and *(b)* national insurance contributions. [85749]

Dawn Primarolo: Where a training allowance funded by the European Social Fund is paid to a trainee who is not an employee the allowance will not normally be chargeable to income tax or National Insurance contributions.

Republic of Ireland GNP

Mr. Heathcoat-Amory: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what is the per capita Gross National Product in the Republic of Ireland as a percentage of the EU average, for the most recent year available. [85851]

Ms Hewitt: The information requested falls within the responsibility of the Director of the Office for National Statistics. I have asked him to reply.

Letter from Tim Holt to Mr. David Heathcoat-Amory, dated 8 June 1999:

As director of the Office for National Statistics (ONS), I have been asked to reply to your recent parliamentary question on the per capita gross national product of the Republic of Ireland.

The latest estimates available from Eurostat (the Statistical Office of the European Community) are for 1998. These show the Republic of Ireland with a per capita gross domestic product of 87.5 per cent of the EU average. These estimates are subject to revision.

National Insurance Contributions

Mr. Mallon: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what steps are being taken to enable the person whose National Insurance number is BT 21 74 42 B, to pay their

Class 2 National Insurance contributions, and how long it will be before these steps are completed. [86173]

Dawn Primarolo: The Director of the Inland Revenue National Insurance Contributions Office will shortly be writing to the hon. Member about the person concerned.

VAT

Mr. Maude: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if he will estimate the revenue implications for the Exchequer of the judgment of the European Court in the First National Bank of Chicago case (Case C-172/96); and if he will make a statement. [85684]

Ms Hewitt: HM Customs and Excise are monitoring claims from businesses applying the ruling to previous forex transactions. It is too early to estimate with any certainty the final amount to be paid out.

Mr. Maude: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what is his policy with regard to the VAT treatment of *(a)* unilateral and *(b)* bilateral supplies in the field of financial transactions and instruments following the judgment of the European Court in the First National Bank of Chicago case (Case C-172/96). [85683]

Dawn Primarolo: Supplies of financial services and instruments are exempt from VAT. VAT on related costs is recoverable to the extent that it relates to supplies to counter-parties outside the territory of the European Community.

Mr. Maude: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what proposals for legislation with regards to VAT on financial services have been made by the European Union VAT Committee; and if he will make a statement. [85681]

Dawn Primarolo: No such proposal has been made.

Mr. Maude: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what discussions (i) he, (ii) Treasury Ministers and (iii) Treasury officials have had with *(a)* the European Commission, *(b)* the European Union VAT Committee and *(c)* the Council of Ministers with regards to VAT on financial services. [85682]

Dawn Primarolo: The European Commission has commissioned a series of studies into the feasibility of applying VAT to financial services. Customs and Excise are responsible for VAT policy, and officials have spoken to Commission officials about the progress of the studies on a number of occasions. In addition, Customs officials have attended seminars and a conference organised by the Commission. The consultants' report has yet to be considered by the Commission. No proposals have been made.

EU Budget

Mr. Rowlands: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what his estimate is following the agreement of the Berlin Council on the European budget of the net United Kingdom contributions to the budget until 2006. [86051]

Ms Hewitt: We intend to publish estimates when the Commission has provided figures for allocations under the structural and cohesion funds. These are expected in the next few weeks.

CABINET OFFICE

Biotechnology

Mr. Baker: To ask the Minister for the Cabinet Office, pursuant to his answer to the hon. Member for Lewes of 24 May 1999, *Official Report*, column *39*, if he will provide further details in respect of the questions asked. [85659]

Dr. Jack Cunningham: No.

Mr. Alan Simpson: To ask the Minister for the Cabinet Office what criteria were used by the Biotechnology Presentation Group in identifying an independent scientist to appear on the "Today" programme on 10 May to comment on the Christian Aid/Action Aid report on GM foods in the third world. [85929]

Dr. Jack Cunningham: In its report on 12 May, the Science and Technology Select Committee of this House called for a more informed public debate on Genetic Modification and said that the Government had a role to play in leading that debate. The Government also believe it important that the public hears the views of scientists who are experts on genetic modification.

Mr. Alan Simpson: To ask the Minister for the Cabinet Office if he will list the scientific sources of his advice on the benefits of biotechnology, indicating those he will make available to hon. Members. [85933]

Dr. Jack Cunningham: The Government are advised by experts who sit on our advisory committees. We also pay careful attention to the views of other experts. The potential benefits of biotechnology were most recently described in the report of the Nuffield Council on Bioethics published on 27 May.

Mr. Alan Simpson: To ask the Minister for the Cabinet Office for what reasons the briefing notes on biodiversity, herbicide resistance and cross pollination in connection with GMOs prepared for the Government's Biotechnology Presentation Group were inadequate. [85932]

Dr. Jack Cunningham: The briefing notes were not sufficiently informative.

Mr. Yeo: To ask the Minister for the Cabinet Office if he will publish the minutes of all meetings of the Biotechnology Presentation Group. [86119]

Dr. Jack Cunningham: The minutes of inter-Ministerial meetings are not normally published. Previous Governments followed the same practice.

Mr. Yeo: To ask the Minister for the Cabinet Office (1) what amendments the Biotechnology Presentation Group made in the report he published on the Health Implications of genetically modified foods by the Chief Medical Officer and the Chief Scientific Adviser; and if he will publish a list of all the amendments stating the reasons for them; [86116]

(2) if the authors of the report he published on the Health Implications of genetically modified foods had been asked to redraft their report by the Biotechnology Presentation Group; how many drafts the report went through prior to publication; and if he will publish the original draft. [86117]

Dr. Jack Cunningham: After discussing an initial draft with Ministers, the Chief Medical Officer and the Chief Scientific Adviser revised the report in order to ensure that it was more easily comprehensible for the lay reader and to include specific recommendations for action. The only amendment to the report made by the Biotechnology Presentation Group was to suggest an expansion of the heading before paragraph 41.

Mr. Yeo: To ask the Minister for the Cabinet Office what central rebuttals strategy had been established for use after his oral statement on biotechnology of 21 May 1999, *Official Report*, columns 1371–73. [86127]

Dr. Jack Cunningham: I refer the hon. Member to the answer given to my hon. Friend the Member for Nottingham, South (Mr. Simpson) on 26 May 1999, *Official Report*, column *153*.

Mr. Yeo: To ask the Minister for the Cabinet Office if the new advisory committees he announced in his oral statement on biotechnology of 21 May 1999, *Official Report*, columns 1371–73, will sit in public. [86133]

Dr. Jack Cunningham: The new advisory committees will abide by the guidelines on transparency contained in paragraph 51 of the Report of the Review of the Regulatory Framework, published on 21 May, copies of which are in the Libraries of the House.

Courts (Ministerial Visits)

Mr. Clappison: To ask the Minister for the Cabinet Office if he has visited the magistrates court at Pontefract; and how many other *(a)* magistrates' courts and *(b)* Crown courts he has visited since he became Minister with responsibility for drugs policy. [85899]

Dr. Jack Cunningham: I have not visited the magistrates court at Pontefract in my capacity as Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster. I visited Stockport magistrates court on Friday 5 February 1999.

Responsibility for Crown courts rests with my right hon. Friend the Lord Chancellor.

National Minimum Wage

Mr. Rowlands: To ask the Minister for the Cabinet Office how many people in his Department and its associated bodies and agencies have benefited from the introduction of a national minimum wage. [86096]

Mr. Kilfoyle: The Cabinet Office, along with its Agencies (including the Central Office of Information), have no staff who benefited from the National Minimum Wage (NMW). The Department's lowest rates of pay are above the threshold required by the NMW.

Cabinet Committees

Mr. Alan Simpson: To ask the Minister for the Cabinet Office if he will list the dates on which MISC 6 has met since 21 October 1998; what was discussed; and who attended. [86068]

Dr. Jack Cunningham: The Government does not reveal when Cabinet Committees meet or the issues which they discuss. Previous Governments followed the same practice.

Genetically Modified Food

Mr. Alan Simpson: To ask the Minister for the Cabinet Office if he will place in the Library the initial draft of the paper on GM foods prepared by the Chief Medical Officer and the Chief Scientific Adviser. [85930]

Dr. Jack Cunningham: The Government took the unusual step of publishing the report by the Chief Scientific Adviser and the Chief Medical Officer on GM foods. The initial draft which Ministers considered was revised by the authors to ensure that it was easily comprehensible for the lay reader and to include specific recommendations for action.

Reports (Publication)

Mr. Yeo: To ask the Minister for the Cabinet Office if he will make it his policy to publish all reports by the Chief Medical Officer and the Chief Scientific Adviser without amendment. [86118]

Dr. Jack Cunningham: I am not responsible for all reports of the Chief Medical Officer or the Chief Scientific Adviser. The Chief Medical Officer is accountable to my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Health, and the Chief Scientific Adviser to my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry.

NORTHERN IRELAND

Open Government

Dr. David Clark: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland how many applications for information she received under the Open Government: Code of Practice on Access to Government Information in the last parliamentary Session; and how many of these applications were granted. [83116]

Mr. Ingram *[holding answer 10 May 1999]:* For monitoring purposes, this information is collected on a calendar year basis. Information for 1997 was published last year in the Open Government: Code of Practice on Access to Government Information 1997 Report. In 1998, my Department received 13 applications for information under the Code and granted 12 of them. The information needed to answer the remaining request is still outstanding; it is being pursued.

HIV/AIDS

Dr. Strang: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland how many people with AIDS died in *(a)* Northern Ireland and *(b)* each health authority area of Northern Ireland in each year from 1981 to 1998, and in 1999 to date. [84812]

Mr. McFall: The information is set out in the following table. It should be noted that information broken down by Health and Social Services board area relates to the Board in which diagnosis was first made. It does not necessarily reflect the Board of residence.

AIDS report	Eastern board	Northern board	Total
1981	—	—	—
1982	1	—	1
1983	—	—	—
1984	—	—	—
1985	1	—	1
1986	—	—	—
1987	1	—	1
1988	1	—	1
1989	7	—	7
1990	9	—	9
1991	5	—	5
1992	4	1	5
1993	4	—	4
1994	7	—	7
1995	8	—	8
1996	6	1	7
1997	1	1	2
1998	—	—	—
1999	—	—	—
Total	55	3	58

Dr. Strang: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland how many people diagnosed with AIDS and now known to have died there were in *(a)* Northern Ireland and *(b)* each health authority area of Northern Ireland in each year from 1981 to 1998, and in 1999 to date. [84811]

Mr. McFall: The information is set out in the following table. It should be noted that information broken down by Health and Social Services Board area relates to the Board in which diagnosis was first made. It does not necessarily reflect the Board of residence.

AIDS report	Eastern board	Northern board	Total
1981	—	—	—
1982	—	—	—
1983	2	—	2
1984	4	1	5
1985	9	—	9
1986	1	—	1
1987	—	—	—
1988	—	—	—
1989	—	—	—
1990	—	—	—
1991	—	—	—
1992	—	—	—
1993	—	—	—
1994	—	—	—
1995	—	—	—
1996	—	—	—
1997	—	—	—
1998	—	1	1
Total	16	2	18

Dr. Strang: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland if she will list the cumulative numbers of people with AIDS who died in *(a)* Northern Ireland and *(b)* each health authority area of Northern Ireland in each year from 1981 to 1998, and in 1999 to date. [84813]

Mr. McFall: The information is set out in the following table. It should be noted that information broken down by Health and Social Service Board area relates to the Board in which diagnosis was first made. It does not necessarily reflect the Board of residence.

AIDS report	Eastern Board	Northern Board	Total
1981	—	—	—
1982	1	—	1
1983	1	—	1
1984	1	—	1
1985	2	—	2
1986	2	—	2
1987	3	—	3
1988	4	—	4
1989	11	—	11
1990	20	—	20
1991	25	—	25
1992	29	1	30
1993	33	1	34
1994	40	1	41
1995	48	1	49
1996	54	2	56
1997	55	3	58
1998	55	3	58
1999	55	3	58

Dr. Strang: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland how many people were newly diagnosed HIV positive (i) broken down by probable means of transmission and (ii) in total in *(a)* Northern Ireland and *(b)* each health authority area of Northern Ireland, for each year from 1981 to 1998, and for 1999 to date. [84815]

Mr. McFall: The information is set out in the following tables. The data in respect of each Health and Social Services Board area have not specifically been broken down by exposure category as this would undermine the principle of preserving the anonymity of those who come forward for examination etc. It should also be noted that information broken down by Health and Social Services Board area relates to the Board in which diagnosis was first made. It does not necessarily reflect the Board of residence.

(a) Northern Ireland

	Exposure category						
	1 Sex between men	*2* Sex between men and women	*3* IDU	*4* Blood factor	*5* Blood/tissue transfer	*6* Other/ undetermined	Total
1984	1	1	—	9	—	—	11
1985	5	1	—	7	—	—	13
1986	8	2	—	—	1	—	11
1987	4	4	1	—	—	—	9
1988	8	—	2	—	—	—	10
1989	3	5	2	—	—	—	10
1990	8	2	—	—	—	1	11
1991	15	2	—	1	—	—	18
1992	7	3	—	1	—	—	11
1993	6	5	1	—	—	—	12
1994	10	—	—	—	—	—	10

(a) Northern Ireland

	Exposure category						
	1 Sex between men	*2* Sex between men and women	*3* IDU	*4* Blood factor	*5* Blood/tissue transfer	*6* Other/ undetermined	*Total*
1995	6	5	—	—	—	—	11
1996	12	4	—	—	—	—	16
1997	6	2	—	—	—	—	8
1998	6	4	—	—	—	—	10
1999	—	3	1	—	—	—	4
Total	105	43	7	18	1	1	175

(b) Each Health and Social Services Board area

HIV report	*Eastern*	*Northern*	*Southern*	*Western*	*Total*
1984	11	—	—	—	11
1985	13	—	—	—	13
1986	11	—	—	—	11
1987	9	—	—	—	9
1988	9	—	—	1	10
1989	10	—	—	—	10
1990	11	—	—	—	11
1991	18	—	—	—	18
1992	11	—	—	—	11
1993	12	—	—	—	12
1994	8	—	—	2	10
1995	10	—	—	1	11
1996	16	—	—	—	16
1997	8	—	—	—	8
1998	9	—	1	—	10
1999	2	1	—	1	4
Total	168	1	1	5	175

Dr. Strang: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland if she will list the cumulative number of people who had been diagnosed HIV positive (i) broken down by probable means of transmission and (ii) in total in *(a)* Northern Ireland and *(b)* each health authority area of Northern Ireland, for each year from 1981 to 1998, and for 1999 to date. [84816]

Mr. McFall: The information is set out in the following tables. The data in respect of each Health and Social Services Board area have not specifically been broken down by exposure category as this would undermine the principle of preserving the anonymity of those who come forward for examination etc. It should also be noted that information broken down by health and Social Services Board area relates to the Board in which diagnosis was first made. It does not necessarily reflect the Board of residence.

(a) Northern Ireland

	Exposure category						
	1 Sex between men	*2* Sex between men and women	*3* IDU	*4* Blood factor	*5* Blood/tissue transfer	*6* Others /undetermined	*Total*
1984	1	1	—	9	—	—	11
1985	6	2	—	16	—	—	24
1986	14	4	—	16	1	—	35
1987	18	8	1	16	1	—	44
1988	26	8	3	16	1	—	54
1989	29	13	5	16	1	—	64
1990	37	15	5	16	1	1	75
1991	52	17	5	17	1	1	93
1992	59	20	5	18	1	1	104
1993	65	25	6	18	1	1	116
1994	75	25	6	18	1	1	126
1995	81	30	6	18	1	1	137
1996	93	34	6	18	1	1	153
1997	99	36	6	18	1	1	161
1998	105	40	6	18	1	1	171
1999	105	43	7	18	1	1	175

(b) Each Health and Social Services Board Area

HIV Report	*Eastern*	*Northern*	*Southern*	*Western*	*Total*
1984	11	—	—	—	11
1985	24	—	—	—	24
1986	35	—	—	—	35
1987	44	—	—	—	44
1988	53	—	—	1	54
1989	63	—	—	1	64
1990	74	—	—	1	75
1991	92	—	—	1	93
1992	103	—	—	1	104
1993	115	—	—	1	116
1994	123	—	—	3	126
1995	133	—	—	4	137
1996	149	—	—	4	153
1997	157	—	—	4	161
1998	166	—	1	4	171
1999	168	1	1	5	175

Dr. Strang: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland if she will list the cumulative number of people who had been diagnosed HIV positive and not known to have died (i) broken down by probable means of transmission and (ii) in total in *(a)* Northern Ireland and *(b)* each health authority area of Northern Ireland, for each year from 1981 to 1998, and for 1999 to date. [84817]

Mr. McFall: The information is set out in the following tables. The data in respect of each Health and Social Services Board area have not specifically been broken down by exposure category as this would undermine the principle of preserving the anonymity of those who come forward for examination etc. It should also be noted that information broken down by Health and Social Services Board area relates to the Board in which diagnosis was first made. It does not necessarily reflect the Board of residence.

(a) Northern Ireland

	Exposure Category 1 Sex between men	2 Sex between men and women	3 IDU	4 Blood factor	Total
1984	—	—	—	6	6
1985	3	—	—	6	9
1986	5	2	—	6	13
1987	5	4	1	6	16
1988	10	4	2	6	22
1989	11	7	2	6	26
1990	14	8	2	6	30
1991	24	9	2	6	41
1992	28	11	2	6	47
1993	34	15	2	6	57
1994	42	15	2	6	65
1995	47	20	2	6	75
1996	59	24	2	6	91
1997	65	26	2	6	99
1998	71	30	2	6	109
1999	71	33	3	6	113

(b) Each Health and Social Services Board Area

HIV Report	Eastern	Northern	Southern	Western	Total
1984	6	—	—	—	6
1985	9	—	—	—	9
1986	13	—	—	—	13
1987	16	—	—	—	16
1988	21	—	—	1	22
1989	25	—	—	1	26
1990	29	—	—	1	30
1991	40	—	—	1	41
1992	46	—	—	1	47
1993	56	—	—	1	57
1994	62	—	—	3	65
1995	71	—	—	4	75
1996	87	—	—	4	91
1997	95	—	—	4	99
1998	104	—	1	4	109
1999	106	1	1	5	113

Dr. Strang: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland if she will list the cumulative number of people diagnosed with AIDS in *(a)* Northern Ireland and *(b)* each health authority area of Northern Ireland in each year from 1981 to 1998, and in 1999 to date. [54814]

Mr. McFall: The information is set out in the following table. It should be noted that information broken down by Health and Social Services Board area relates to the Board in which diagnosis was first made. It does not necessarily reflect the Board of residence.

AIDS report	Eastern board	Northern board	Total
1981	—	—	—
1982	1	—	1
1983	1	—	1
1984	1	—	1
1985	2	—	2
1986	3	—	3
1987	4	—	4
1988	11	—	11
1989	19	—	19
1990	25	—	25
1991	31	—	31
1992	38	1	39
1993	46	2	48
1994	57	3	60
1995	70	3	73
1996	71	3	74
1997	71	4	75
1998	71	5	76
1999	71	5	76

Sewage Disposal

Mr. Beggs: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland when she will update her assessment of the unit cost per household in Northern Ireland for the provision of sewage disposal facilities. [85623]

Mr. Paul Murphy: Responsibility for the subject in question has been delegated to the Water Service under its chief executive, Mr. Robert C. Martin. I have asked him to arrange for a reply to be given.

Letter from Robert C. Martin to Mr. Roy Beggs, dated 2 June 1999:

You recently asked the Secretary of State a Parliamentary Question about when the unit cost per household in Northern Ireland for the provision of sewage disposal facilities will be updated. I have been asked to respond as Chief Executive of Water Service with operational responsibility for the provision of sewerage services.

When Water Service's Director of Finance, Mr D Carson, wrote to you on 2 March 1999 about this issue he referred to a Departmental review of the unit cost issue. The current position is that the review of this complex policy matter is being actively progressed. As soon as the outcome of the review is known I will arrange for you to be informed.

Paramilitary Violence

Mr. William Ross: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland (1) if she will list for the week ended

Saturday 22 May the number of *(a)* punishment beatings and *(b)* punishment shootings which took place in Northern Ireland indicating how many in each category were committed by (i) Loyalist and (ii) Republican groups; [85622]

(2) if she will list for the week ended Saturday 22 May the number of violent incidents involving paramilitary groups which took place in Northern Ireland, indicating how many involved *(a)* Loyalist and *(b)* Republican groups. [85621]

Mr. Ingram: The number of security incidents during the period 16–22 May 1999 are shown:

	Number
Deaths	0
Shooting incidents	3
Bombing incidents	2

The number of casualties as a result of paramilitary-style attacks during the period are as follows:

	Loyalist	*Republican*
Assaults	1	0
Shootings	3	1
Total	4	1

Notes:

1. Figures may be subject to minor amendment.
2. The shooting incident cannot as yet be firmly attributed to a grouping.

Over-30 Months Scheme

Mr. Donaldson: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland what assessment she has made of the possibility of utilising the spare capacity at the incinerator at Duncrue in Belfast for the incineration of meat and bone meal and tallow required under the Over Thirty Month Scheme arising out of the BSE crisis. [85957]

Mr. Paul Murphy: The Department of the Environment Water Service incinerator at Duncrue, Belfast, has a capacity of three tonnes dry solids per hour and is currently operating at this throughput. There is therefore no spare capacity in the incinerator to accommodate the incineration of meat and bone meal and tallow from the Over Thirty Months Scheme.

Bloody Sunday Inquiry

Mr. William Ross: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland what are the total sums which her Department has spent on the present inquiry into the events on Sunday 30 January 1972, up to 31 May 1999; under what headings those sums were disbursed; and what are the sums under each heading. [85909]

Marjorie Mowlam: The total costs up to 31 March this year are £6,644,008.

Patient Discharges

Mr. William Ross: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland how many hospital patients there are in each health and social services trust who require discharge to *(a)* a residential home *(b)* a nursing home and *(c)* domiciliary care. [85857]

Mr. McFall: This information is not available in the form requested and could be obtained only at disproportionate cost. However, a special survey was commissioned by the Department of Health and Social Services on 26 February 1999. The attached table shows the number of patients within each Trust and Board area who were ready for discharge on that date, and where lack of funding for appropriate community care services was said to be the reason for their remaining in hospital.

Trust	*Number*
Royal Group	7
Belfast City	4
Green Park	5
Ulster Community and Hospitals	0
Down Lisburn	10
Mater	0
Eastern HSSB Total	26
Armagh and Bungannon	5
Newry and Mourne	0
Craigavon Area Hospital Group	25
Southern HSSB Total	30
Causeway	21
Homefirst	44
Northern HSSB Total	65
Foyle	0
Sperrin Lakeland	1
Western HSSB Total	1
N. I. Grand Total	122

Coroners Inquests

Mr. Corbyn: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland what plans she has to review the legislation governing coroners' inquests in Northern Ireland. [86271]

Mr. Vaz: I have been asked to reply.

Neither I nor the Lord Chancellor has any immediate plans to review the legislation governing coroners' inquests in Northern Ireland. However, this is a matter which will be kept under review in consultation with the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland.

SOCIAL SECURITY

Child Support Agency

Ms Jenny Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what progress has been made with the plans to reform the Child Support Agency; and when he expects to announce his proposals. [85540]

Mr. John M. Taylor: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security when the Child Support Agency White Paper is due to be published. [85624]

Angela Eagle: Final proposals for reform of the child support system will be announced shortly.

Benefit-related Mail

Mr. Field: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security, pursuant to his answer of 24 May 1999, *Official Report*, column *47*, on housing benefit, what charges are made by the Post Office for not redirecting benefit-related mail in a local authority's area. [86066]

Angela Eagle: Further to my written answer on 24 May 1999, *Official Report*, column *47*, in which I stated that 56 local authorities are now operating the do not redirect service, I am pleased to confirm that this number has now increased to 64 local authorities. The Post Office does not make any charges to individual local authorities for not redirecting benefit-related post. However, the Department has agreed an annual fee with the Post Office for the national operation of this service. For the first year's operation of the do not redirect service this fee is set at £366,266.

Asylum Seekers

Fiona Mactaggart: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security how many families with children who applied for asylum at a port of entry to Britain in the last financial year have been in receipt of income support. [85562]

Angela Eagle: Figures for the last financial year are not yet available. However, in 1998 the number of new port asylum seeker and other urgent payment cases in receipt of Income Support who have children was 5,000.

Notes:

1. Figure relates to Great Britain.
2. Figure will include a number of non-asylum seekers which receive Urgent Case Payments for other reasons.
3. Figure has been rounded to the nearest thousand cases, and will therefore be subject to a degree of sampling error.
4. Children are defined as age 0–15 years.
5. Sample size 5 per cent.

Source:

Income Support Statistics Quarterly Enquiries, February to November 1998.

Income Support

Mr. Webb: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security, pursuant to his answer of 25 January 1999, *Official Report*, column *49*, regarding publication of take-up estimates, *(a)* when he now expects to publish such estimates and *(b)* for what reason there has been a further delay in publication. [85637]

Angela Eagle: The Department's statisticians expect to publish revised figures for 1996–97 and new figures for 1997–98 as a single document in the late summer, probably early September.

It has taken longer than expected to complete extensive investigation and testing of the routines used in calculating take-up to ensure the quality of take-up estimates. This phase is now complete and production of estimates is under way.

We have taken the opportunity to look again at the possibility of publishing 1996–97 estimates of take-up for Job Seekers Allowance (income based JSA). Informed judgments on this and the other benefits are assisted by considering 1996–97 and 1997–98 data in parallel. Statisticians therefore judge that the early production of quality-assured estimates is best served by publishing 1996–97 and 1997–98 statistics together.

Statisticians advise that they expect the final estimate, of the average number of pensioners entitled to but not receiving Income Support in 1996–97, to be close to the provisional revised estimate of 400,000–700,000 given in DSS Press notice 98/300 of 11 December, a copy of which is in the Library.

Housing Benefit

Mr. Rendel: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security (1) what interim conclusions have been reached by the Housing Benefit verification pilot projects; and if he will make a statement; [85640]

(2) what emergency provisions exist for claimants and their partners *(a)* who do not have a National Insurance number and *(b)* whose identity cannot be confirmed to replace Housing Benefit and Council Tax Benefit under the Housing Benefit verification pilot schemes; [85642]

(3) when he will publish *(a)* the statistics collected under and *(b)* the final results and conclusions of the Housing Benefit verification pilot projects relating to National Insurance numbers; [85639]

(4) what is the length of time currently taken to process DCI1LA forms for *(a)* children leaving care and *(b)* people from abroad; [85641]

(5) what discretionary powers Benefits Agency staff have when trying to establish the identity of individuals who are unable to supply documents in the Housing Benefit verification pilots. [85645]

Angela Eagle: Section 19 of the Social Security Administration (Fraud) Act 1997 requires individuals to provide, as a qualifying condition of benefit, a National Insurance number in respect of themselves and their partner. Since 12 April, the extension of this provision to Housing Benefit and Council Tax Benefit has been piloted in seven local authorities. This provides an opportunity to test procedures and information about volumes and costs to prepare for national implementation on 6 September.

Early indications from the pilot are that virtually all claimants have been able, and are willing, to produce satisfactory evidence of their identity and proof of their National Insurance number. Consequently, there has been very little call on the Benefits Agency to trace or allocate National Insurance numbers. Of the few DCI1LA forms sent some relate to people from abroad but none have so far been sent in respect of children leaving care. There are no undue delays in DCI1LA forms being processed. However, this would have no adverse effect on claimants anyway as Section 19 will have been satisfied, and benefit paid, once sufficient information or evidence has been provided to enable a National Insurance number to be traced or allocated. Any individual who does not yet have a National Insurance number will be allocated one once he has furnished this information or evidence.

The procedures used by local authorities to establish identity will apply the same standards to those currently operated by the Benefits Agency. Where an individual is unable to provide satisfactory documentary evidence of

their identity every effort will be made to establish and corroborate their personal history by means of an interview.

Statistics are currently being collected on the pilot and these, together with the final results and conclusions from the pilot, will be available in late August.

Mr. Rendel: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security in cases where there is an over payment of housing benefit which cannot be reclaimed from the recipient, from which organisation's budget the overpayment is deducted once it is detected. [85643]

Angela Eagle: The majority of Housing Benefit overpayments are recoverable, although it is for local authorities to choose whether to do so. The Department pays differing levels of direct subsidy to local authorities, from nil to 95 per cent., depending on the cause of the overpayment. If the error is due to this Department or to a Department for Education and Employment (DfEE) official error, full subsidy is paid on any unrecovered benefit. However, if the overpayment arises due to an official error by the local authority, nil subsidy is payable and the local authority has to bear the cost of any unrecovered benefit. In all other cases, including fraud, some subsidy is paid and the local authority can retain any monies recovered. With the exception of monies recovered in respect of this Department or DfEE official error, no adjustment to subsidy is made to reflect any amount recovered.

Different subsidy arrangements apply in England and Wales where Housing Benefit is paid to local authorities' own tenants, and are the responsibility of the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions and the Secretary of State for Wales.

Widows

Mrs. Fyfe: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what assistance will be available to widows aged 45 to 60 years to help them to find a job or a training/education place during the six months for which they receive benefit. [85940]

Angela Eagle: New widows aged 45 to 60 will receive help through ONE, the single work-focused gateway service. ONE will give new claimants access to a personal adviser to guide them through their options. The focus will be on enabling people to access a wide range of help and support to ensure that they do not miss out on the opportunities that are available to them.

Mrs. Fyfe: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what consultations he has had about the likelihood of widows aged 45 to 60 years, who are not already in full-time paid work, obtaining such work within six months of their bereavement. [85941]

Angela Eagle: Our proposal to introduce a time-limited Bereavement Allowance for widows and widowers aged 45 or over who have no dependent children was published in the public consultation document "A new contract for Welfare: Support in Bereavement". For those widows and widowers who need to find work to support themselves at the end of the six-month period, our comprehensive welfare-to-work programme offers a range of support, including advice on employment, training and benefits.

Benefit Entitlement (Students)

Mr. Webb: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security if he will estimate the cost of allowing students to claim *(a)* housing benefit, *(b)* income support during the summer and *(c)* income support all year round; and if he will estimate the numbers who would be newly entitled in each case. [86052]

Angela Eagle: Since the start of the 1990–91 academic year, full-time students have not been entitled to benefits as a means of supporting themselves whilst studying. Financial support provided to the vast majority of full-time students by the taxpayer now comes through one source—the education system. Nevertheless, certain students in vulnerable groups, e.g. lone parents, disabled students etc., continue to have access to Income Support, income-based Jobseeker's Allowance and Housing Benefit on the same basis as before.

We do not hold sufficient information about students' housing and income circumstances to be able to estimate the costs of allowing all students to claim Housing Benefit and Income Support.

"Support in Bereavement"

Mr. O'Hara: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security if he will place in the Library a copy of all the responses made to the "Support in Bereavement" consultation document (Cmd 4104). [86042]

Angela Eagle: A list of those who have responded has been placed in the Library. Copies of this list and specific responses are available on request from The Widows' Benefit Consultation Team, 3rd Floor, The Adelphi, 1–11 John Adam Street, London, WC2N 6HT.

Temporary National Insurance Numbers

Mr. Rendel: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security in what circumstances temporary National Insurance Numbers in the format TN(date of birth) M/F are issued. [85644]

Mr. Timms: The Department does not issue temporary National Insurance Numbers. The only circumstance in which they may be used is where an employer does not know the National Insurance Number of a new employee and is submitting end of year returns by magnetic media.

State Second Pension

Mr. Rendel: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security (1) if he will estimate the public expenditure effects, excluding setting up costs, of passporting disabled people with broken work records onto the state second pension by 2002 and for every five-year period until 2047; [86219]

(2) if he will estimate the public expenditure effects, excluding setting up costs, of passporting recipients of invalid care allowance and carers of people receiving attendance allowance or disability living allowance who qualify for home responsibilities protection onto the state second pension by 2002 and for every five year period until 2047; [86210]

(3) if he will estimate the public expenditure effects, excluding setting up costs, of passporting child benefit recipients, where the youngest child for whom the

benefit received is aged five or under, onto the state second pension by 2002 and for every five-year period until 2047. [86211]

Mr. Timms: Gross costs in 2002 would be less than £50 million in total. Figures are not available at 5 yearly intervals from 2002, but the gross costs at 10 yearly intervals thereafter are set out in the following table.

£ billion

	2010	*2020*	*2030*	*2040*	*2050*
Disabled	0.2	1.1	2.1	3.1	4.3
Carers of disabled	0.0	0.1	0.2	0.4	0.6
Carers of children aged 5 and under	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.3	1.4
Total	0.3	1.2	2.3	3.8	6.3

Notes:

1. Figures, supplied by the Government Actuary's Department, are in £ billion at 1998–99 prices. They represent gross costs (excluding income-related benefit offsets) which make no allowance for the amounts that would have been spent on Home Responsibilities Protection for SERPS under the previous Government's policy.
2. Figures are calculated to the nearest £100 million. Totals may include amounts of less than £100 million not otherwise shown in the table.
3. Real earnings growth of 1.5 per cent. per annum has been assumed.

Jobseeker's Allowance

Mrs. Fyfe: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what will be the minimum possible Income Support paid per week under the proposals for welfare reform to a single adult aged over 18 years, with no dependants, who has no savings or other income, and *(a)* who is not eligible for JSA because the severity of his disability makes him unable to do any work and *(b)* is eligible for JSA but is unable to find work; and what is the proposed minimum level of Disability Income Guarantee. [85939]

Angela Eagle: Disabled people with a low income may be eligible to claim Income Support or income based Jobseeker's Allowance. The overall weekly amount of benefit payable will depend on the individual's circumstances, such as their age, the severity of their disability and other factors. If they satisfy all the conditions for entitlement to the full IS/JSA personal allowance, a single person aged 18 to 24 would currently receive a personal allowance of £40.70. A single person aged 25 or over would receive a personal allowance of £51.40. If they qualified for the disability premium they would receive a further £21.90. The same rates of benefit apply to both Income Support and Jobseeker's Allowance.

Our proposals on welfare reform for disabled people were set out in our consultation document "A new contract for welfare: SUPPORT FOR DISABLED PEOPLE" published last October. Under the proposals, a new Disability Income Guarantee will be introduced in April 2001 and will provide extra help and security for those with the highest care needs. It will provide help through the income-related benefits to severely disabled adults and families with disabled children who get the highest rate care component of Disability Living Allowance. The overall amount of benefit will depend on individual circumstances. The increase in support builds on the help that is already available because of disability. This extra support will be paid through a new higher rate of disability premium. At April 1998 rates, it will be worth an extra £5.75 for a single adult or child, and £8.30 for a couple.

Benefits Agency (Computerisation)

Dr. Cable: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security to which companies the Government have made payments for consultancy regarding the computerisation of the Benefits Agency in the last three years; how much was paid to each company; what the current status of the project is; and if he will make a statement. [85437]

Angela Eagle: The information is in the table.

Companies the Government has made payments for consultancy regarding the computerisation of the Benefits Agency in the last three years

Project	*Contract dates*	*Contract award value*	*Successful company*	*Current status*
Programme Accounting Group (PAG) Consultancy Support	12 November 1996 to 31 December 1996	£36,450	KPMG	Finished
Programme Accounting Group/Programme Accounting Computer System (PACS) Consultancy Support	21 October 1996 to 21 December 1996	£63,508	SEMA	Finished
Consultancy Support	21 October 1996 to 31 December 1996	£138,300	KPMG	
Programme Design Authority (PDA). Implementation Group Support	—	£135,000	Andersens	Finished
Card Access Payment System (CAPS). Programme and Card Payment Delivery Review	11 November 1996 to 28 February 1997	£122,800	Ernst and Young	Finished
Card Access Payment System (CAPS) Migration Conformance Manager	1 April 1997	£78,000	PA Consulting	Finished
Programme Accounting Group (PAG). IT Consultant	1 April 1997 to 30 June 1997	£31,500	Pricewaterhouse Coopers	Finished
Card Access Payment System (CAPS)	9 June 1997 to 8 June 1999	£91,767,220	Andersens	Ongoing
Consultancy Support	—	£613,662	A.S.E.	Ongoing
Financial and Management Information System (FAMIS) Study of Private Sector Partnership potential	20 May 1997 to 27 June 1997	£34,900	KPMG	Finished

Companies the Government has made payments for consultancy regarding the computerisation of the Benefits Agency in the last three years

Project	*Contract dates*	*Contract award value*	*Successful company*	*Current status*
Card Access Payment System (CAPS) Migration Strategy	3 February 1997 to 31 March 1997	£263,221	Andersens	Finished
Programme Accounting Group	12 February 1997 to 28 March 1997	£29,750	KPMG	Finished
Audit Trail Analysis System (ATAS). Tool Development	17 March 1997 to 11 April 1997	£30,000	ICL	Finished
Programme Accounting Group (PAG) Consultancy Support	14 July 1997 to 31 January 1998	£63,000	KPMG	Finished
Programme Accounting Group (PAG) Technical Architect	15 September 1997 to 30 April 1998	£135,240	A.S.E.	Finished
Banking and Accountancy Branch (BAB) Implimentation Management	3 February 1998 to 31 March 1998	£76,150	SEMA	Finished
Review of BA IS/IT Strategy	11 August 1998 to 4 September 1998	£16,500	PA Consulting	Finished
Card Access Payment System (CAPS) Review of Change Management	2 February 1999 to 8 March 1999	£18,800	Admiral	Finished
Banking and Accountancy Branch (BAB) IT Consultant	15 February 1999 to 26 March 1999	£29,023	PA Consulting	Finished
BA Decision Making and Appeals Implementation Programme	8 June 1998 to 30 November 1999	£360,000	Andersen Consulting	Ongoing

FOREIGN AND COMMONWEALTH AFFAIRS

Pakistan and India

Mr. Rowe: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what steps Her Majesty's Government are taking to support an improvement in relations between India and Pakistan; and if he will make a statement. [85304]

Mr. Hoon: We welcomed the resumption of dialogue between India and Pakistan and applaud the joint commitment made by the two Prime Ministers in Lahore in February. We hope that the next Indian government will continue the trend towards improved dialogue with Pakistan.

Sudan

Mr. Cox: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will make a statement on relations with Sudan. [85532]

Mr. Hoon: The Sudanese demand last August that we remove both the Ambassador and his Deputy from Khartoum made it impossible for us to sustain a fully operational Embassy. The Foreign Secretary therefore ordered the temporary withdrawal of all British staff from Khartoum on 27 August.

Since that time, we have been in regular contact with the Sudanese with the objective of normalising relations. I am hopeful that we shall soon have British staff back in Khartoum on a permanent basis so that we can pursue the important work that is to be done there.

GCHQ (Pension Rights)

Mr. Maples: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will estimate the total cost of the compensation for loss of pension rights which his Department has agreed to pay to former employees of GCHQ. [85508]

Mr. Robin Cook: GCHQ officials and the Council of Civil Service Unions are continuing to hold discussions about the detailed circumstances of the 14 individuals and the basis for calculating the amount of compensation to be paid to each of them. They are aiming to conclude the process as soon as possible, but until these facts are established I am not in a position to estimate the total cost.

Angola

Mr. Gordon Prentice: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what steps he is taking to promote trade with Angola. [85329]

Mr. Wilson: I have been asked to reply.

British Trade International is responsible for trade promotion and investment around the world. British Trade International activities in relation to Angola are focused primarily on the support for good UK projects in the off-shore oil and related support and service sectors.

Libya

Mr. Baker: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what assessment he has made of the extent of the involvement of Colonel Gadaffi in terrorist incidents since 1988. [85760]

Mr. Tony Lloyd: The United Kingdom has no proof of recent Libyan government involvement in recent terrorist incidents. Recent progress in the Lockerbie (1988) and UTA (1989) cases has led to the suspension of United Nations sanctions against Libya under the relevant UN Security Council resolutions. The United Nations Secretary-General is required to report on Libya's

compliance with all the requirements of those resolutions, including renunciation of terrorism, before UN sanctions can be lifted.

Mr. Baker: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs to what extent he has taken into account his Department's assessment of the alleged role of Colonel Gadaffi in terrorist incidents since 1988 in deciding to seek to normalise relations between the UK and Libya. [85759]

Mr. Hoon: The United Kingdom has no evidence of recent Libyan government involvement in recent terrorist incidents.

Following the handover of the Lockerbie suspects and subsequent suspension of the UN and related EU sanctions against Libya, we have been in contact with the Libyans to discuss other outstanding bilateral issues.

We hope that these can be resolved quickly and to our satisfaction. The extent to which we can develop more normal relations with Libya depends on the progress we make.

China

Ann Clwyd: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what progress has been made by the United Kingdom Government in promoting dialogue between the Chinese Government and the Dalai Lama. [85850]

Mr. Hoon: We take every opportunity to encourage the Chinese Government to enter into dialogue with the Tibetans, including the Dalai Lama. My right hon. Friends the Prime Minister and Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs did so when they visited China last year. My predecessor, the late Member for Leeds, Central did so again when he visited China in April. We are not aware however of any recent discussions.

Ann Clwyd: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what reports he has *(a)* sought and *(b)* obtained from the Chinese Government about the whereabouts of welfare of the Panchen Lama. [85864]

Mr. Hoon: We have taken every opportunity to seek information from the Chinese Government, both bilaterally and in conjunction with our EU partners, on the well-being of the child recognised by the Dalai Lama as the Panchen Lama. We have also sought permission to visit the child. While this has not been agreed by the Chinese authorities, they have reported that the child is living normally with his family. We shall continue to raise the case.

Middle East

Mr. Dismore: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs when he next proposes to visit the Middle East and to meet the new Israeli Government. [85711]

Mr. Hoon: My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs has no current plans to visit Israel. I hope to visit Israel in the near future to meet the new Israeli Government.

Ron Arad

Mr. Dismore: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what action he has taken over the missing Israeli service-man Ron Arad. [85715]

Mr. Hoon: We regularly raise the issue of Ron Arad and other missing Israeli service-men with those who might have knowledge of their fate. Derek Fatchett met the families of the missing service-men when he visited Israel in January 1998.

South Africa

Mr. Pike: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what plans he has to make contact with the newly elected South African Government and the new President; and if he will make a statement. [86059]

Mr. Tony Lloyd: The UK Government have an extremely close relationship with South Africa's President Mandela. We shall build on this when Thabo Mbeki becomes South Africa's new President.

The Prime Minister has already spoken to Thabo Mbeki to congratulate him and assure him of the UK's continuing commitment to our bilateral relationship. The Deputy Prime Minister will represent the UK Government at the Presidential inauguration in Pretoria on 16 June. We shall sustain the high level ministerial contact when the new South African Government is appointed.

Further visits are already planned: the Secretary of State will accompany Her Majesty The Queen on the State Visit to South Africa on 9–11 November and during the Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting in Durban on 12–14 November, which the Prime Minister will also attend.

EDUCATION AND EMPLOYMENT

Appraisals Handbook

Mrs. May: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment, pursuant to his answers of 25 May 1999, *Official Report*, columns *101–02*, if the Performance Management Framework due to be published later this year is the same as the Appraisals Handbook for which tenders were invited on 6 February 1998. [85945]

Ms Estelle Morris: No.

Education and Training

Mr. Green: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment when he will announce his response to the consultation on post-16 education and training. [85725]

Mr. Mudie: We will be announcing our proposals later in the summer.

New Deal (Young People)

Mr. Cox: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what success the New Deal has had in reducing the number of unemployed young people. [85335]

Mr. Andrew Smith: As the following table shows, since New Deal was introduced nationally in April 1998, unemployment amongst the eligible group has fallen by 41 per cent. compared with a fall of 2.5 per cent. for all unemployed people aged over 25.

The youth labour market is very dynamic, so some people would have left the claimant count without the help provided by New Deal. Nevertheless, initial evidence comparing Pathfinder areas (where New Deal started three months earlier) with the rest of the country suggests that the New Deal increased both the flow of young people out of unemployment and the flow into jobs. The impact of New Deal is being addressed through a comprehensive evaluation programme. All final reports from the evaluation will be published and copies placed in the Library.

Unemployed claimants (UK, nsa)

	Aged 18–24				Aged 25+
	Up to 6 months	*over 6 months*	*over 12 months*	*All aged 18–24*	*All*
April 1998	226,000	119,900	50,000	345,900	1,028,000
April 1999	229,700	70,900	16,300	300,500	1,003,1001
Change	+3,700	–49,000	–33,700	–45,400	–24,900
Percentage change	+1.5	–41	–67	–13	–2.5

Mr. Drew: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment if he will provide a breakdown by New Deal office of those who have refused to participate within the New Deal for 18 to 25-year-olds. [85130]

Mr. Andrew Smith *[holding answer 25 May 1999]:* If on receiving an invitation to take part in the New Deal a young unemployed person terminates their Jobseeker's Allowance claim, the Employment Service will often not know whether it is because they have got a job or because they are refusing to participate.

If sanctions for refusing to comply with New Deal requirements are taken as an indicator, the position in the last six months is as follows: over 7,000 young people had a benefit sanction imposed or were disallowed from claiming Jobseeker's Allowance as part of the New Deal. Of these, 530 were in Scotland, 800 in the Northern region, 1,200 in the North West, 1,120 in Yorkshire and the Humber, 340 in Wales, 910 in the West Midlands, 630 in the East Midlands and Eastern region, 350 in the South West and 1,310 in London and the South East. The figures for individual offices are not collected centrally.

Mr. Rendel: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment of the 34 per cent. of young people who had left the New Deal by the end of February 1999 for unknown reasons, how many are *(a)* no longer claiming jobseeker's allowance, *(b)* have retained their previous jobseeker's allowance entitlement and *(c)* have had their jobseeker's allowance entitlement reduced. [85638]

Mr. Andrew Smith: By the end of February 1999, 35,870 young people had left New Deal for an unknown destination. By the end of March 1999, 7,410 (21 per cent.) had made a subsequent claim for Jobseeker's Allowance at least three months after leaving the New Deal. If young people make a claim for Jobseeker's Allowance within three months of leaving, they re-enter the New Deal.

Education Funding (Liverpool)

Mrs. Ellman: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment how much new *(a)* capital and *(b)* revenue funding has been made available to schools and colleges in Liverpool since May 1997. [85497]

Ms Estelle Morris: The Education Standard Spending Assessment for Liverpool for 1999–2000 is £238,304 million. This represents an increase of £22.5 million or 10.4 per cent. on the equivalent figure for 1997–98. New specific grant and capital allocations made to Liverpool since May 1997 are shown in the following table. In addition, Liverpool Community College has been allocated £17.2 million of capital funding, of which £9.9 million has been paid to date. The college was allocated £20.1 million of revenue funding for 1998–99 academic year. There have also been £0.873 million of capital allocations made to Grant-Maintained school in Liverpool.

£ million

	1997–98	*1998–99*	*1999–2000*
New Deal for Schools capital	1.275	4.016	12.697
Books for Schools—revenue	0.224	0.236	0.472
Other Standards Fund	—	5.853	9.087
Infant Class Size—capital	—	0.085	0.224
Infant Class Size—revenue	—	—	0.124
Energy Efficiency capital	—	0.155	—
Nursery Education Grant—revenue	—	0.497	—

Notes:

1. Standards Fund includes both the LEA and central government grant contribution.

2. New Deal for Schools allocations include total allocations made so far under stages 1 to 3, including those for future years. The total for 1999–2000 includes New Deal allocations to Grant-Maintained schools.

Class Sizes

Mr. Cox: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what progress has been made towards reducing class sizes for five, six and seven year olds. [85521]

Ms Estelle Morris: The number of pupils aged 5, 6 and 7 in classes over 30 have fallen by almost 130,000, from 485,000 in January 1998 to 356,000 in January 1999. In March, £150 million of allocations were announced for 1999–2000, enabling over 4,000 extra teachers to be employed from September and over 1,000 additional classrooms to be built. As a result, fewer than 200,000 pupils will be in large infant classes from September 1999. The implementation of the class size pledge will mean that there will be a net gain of 12,000 places at popular schools, significantly enhancing parental preference.

Education Council

Mr. Maclean: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment if he will publish the latest agenda of the Education Council of 7 June. [85634]

Mr. Mudie: The draft provisional agenda for the Education Council is as follows:

1. Adoption of the provisional agenda
2. Adoption of the list of "A" items
3. Leonardo da Vinci and Socrates programmes; implementation of Europass
   a) Leonardo da Vinci II decision and state of negotiations on Socrates II
      information from the Presidency
   b) Commission report on the initial phase of the Socrates I programme and addendum
      information from the Commission and exchange of views
   c) State of preparations for the implementation of Leonardo da Vinci II and Socrates II
      information from the Commission and exchange of views
   d) Situation regarding the implementation of the Council decision on Europass (O.J.L 17 of 22.1.99)
      information from the Commission
4. Contribution of education to the European Employment Pact
   Presidency discussion paper
5. Forward planning in the field of education
   Presidency discussion paper
6. (Possible) Conference of European Education Ministers in Budapest on 24–26 June 1999
   information from the Presidency and exchange of views
7. Other business.

Grant-maintained Schools

Mr. Burstow: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment (1) if he will make it his policy to implement transitional arrangements to assist former grant-maintained high schools adjust their budgets under the Fair Funding regulations; [85969]

(2) what assessment he has made of the impact of the implementation of fair funding for former grant-maintained high schools. [86067]

Ms Estelle Morris: As a transitional measure, each grant-maintained school has been guaranteed a minimum level of delegated funding for the financial year 1999–2000, based on the amount per pupil which the school received in 1998–99 by way of Annual Maintenance Grant. Funding arrangements for the year 2000–2001 will be announced in due course and will take account of this year's experience.

New Deal (Leeds)

Mr. Clifton-Brown: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment how many jobs under a long-term contract of employment have been secured by 16 to 18-year-olds who have completed the New Deal since its introduction in the Leeds, Central constituency; what was the cost of each job; and what percentage of those who entered the New Deal in Leeds, Central have failed to complete it and for what reasons. [85705]

Mr. Andrew Smith: The New Deal does not apply to young people under 18 years of age. All 16 to 18-year-olds have access to other education, training and employment programmes.

EU Social Affairs Council

Mr. Hood: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what was the outcome of the Social Affairs Council held in Brussels on 25 May 1999; and if he will make a statement. [86038]

Mr. Andrew Smith: My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State, myself and my right hon. Friend the Minister of State for Trade and Industry, attended this meeting of the Council.

The Council discussed the Employee Participation Directive element of the European Company Statute package; political agreement was blocked by Spain, which could not agree a key element of the proposal which requires unanimity.

The council reached political agreement on three proposals concerning Working Time (excluded sectors)—the draft horizontal amending Directive, a draft Maritime Working Time Directive and draft Enforcement Directive extending the working time provisions to seafarers. On the horizontal amending Directive, the UK was able to accept a Presidency compromise on junior doctors which would provide a transitional period of thirteen years before the 48-hour limit would apply. The UK maintained its Parliamentary scrutiny reserve on the horizontal amending Directive and lifted the scrutiny reserves on the Maritime Directives. Supplementary Explanatory Memoranda on the horizontal amending Directive and the Maritime Directives will be provided to both Houses as soon as possible.

The Council heard a progress report from the Presidency on an amended proposal for a Council Directive on Physical Agents and information concerning the draft Directive on Explosive Atmospheres.

The Council considered the Presidency's proposal for a European Employment Pact. The Presidency tabled other documents in connection with the Pact: a Presidency Report; a draft Youth Memorandum (noted by Council); a draft Resolution on equal employment opportunities for people with disabilities (political agreement reached); and a draft Directive on Fixed Term Contracts, based on agreement between the European social partners (Council took note of progress). The Presidency circulated the text of a draft Resolution on the Pact for consideration at the Cologne European Council on 3–4 June.

The Social Affairs Council was followed by a joint session of Social Affairs and Economic and Finance Ministers: this was attended by the Secretary of State, me and my right hon. Friend the Chancellor of the Exchequer. The joint Council discussed the proposal for a European Employment Pact.

Environment Task Force

Judy Mallaber: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment how his Department is evaluating the *(a)* environmental and *(b)* educational benefits of the New Deal Environment Task Force projects. [86073]

Mr. Andrew Smith: The Department for the Environment, Transport and the Regions will shortly be appointing consultants to evaluate the environmental impact of the projects carried out by the New Deal Environment Task Force Option since January 1998.

Further evaluation is currently being carried out by the Employment Service, which will provide details of the skills and qualifications gained by participants on this option. Results of this evaluation will be published later this year.

Judy Mallaber: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment how many young people are currently mandated on to the Environment Task Force having already unsuccessfully tried other New Deal options. [86076]

Mr. Andrew Smith: This information is not collected in the form requested. I shall write to my hon. Friend when some information on this issue is available from the quantitative evaluation of New Deal due to report later in the year and will place a copy of my letter in the Library.

Judy Mallaber: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment how many young people are currently on the Environment Task Force option of New Deal. [86099]

Mr. Andrew Smith: The latest Government Statistical Service figures to the end of March 1999 showed that 6,950 young people were on the Environment Task Force option.

Judy Mallaber: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what range of skills training and qualifications are available in the placements on the New Deal Environment Task Force projects. [86074]

Mr. Andrew Smith: In addition to the practical skills and work experience it provides, young people on the New Deal Environment Task Force Option are able to study towards a qualification listed in Schedule 2 of the Further and Higher Education Act 1992 or by the Scottish Qualifications Authority, normally up to S/NVQ level two or equivalent. Young people may choose to study qualifications which are directly related to the Option, such as Rural Studies and Environmental Management or Environmental Management Skills, or choose to train for skills and qualifications which have a wider application in the labour market, such as Customer Service or Information Technology.

Judy Mallaber: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment how many different placement projects there are currently within the New Deal Environment Task Force. [86075]

Mr. Andrew Smith: This information is not currently available. I shall write to my hon. Friend when the current exercise to collect it is finished and will place a copy of my letter in the Library.

School Budgets

Mrs. May: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment (1) if he will list for each local education authority in England the total amount of funding transferred to individual school budgets in 1999–2000 as a result of his fair funding initiative; [85947]

(2) if he will list for each local education authority in England *(a)* the total aggregated schools budget for 1998–99 including amounts allocated to grant-maintained schools, *(b)* the total individual schools budget for 1999–2000 and *(c)* the education standard spending assessment in 1998–99 and 1999–2000. [86070]

Ms Estelle Morris: Information for the financial year 1999–2000 is still being collected and checked by the Department. We will publish authoritative data showing the plans of the authorities, including the amounts to be held back centrally, later this month. I will write to the hon. Member when the figures she requests are available, and a copy of my letter will be placed in the Library.

Bett Committee Report

Dr. Starkey: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment when the Government are proposing to publish the Bett Committee report on pay and conditions for staff in higher education. [85868]

Mr. Mudie: The pay and conditions of staff in higher education are a matter for the employers. The Independent Review of Higher Education Pay and Conditions—the Bett Committee—was set up by the Universities and Colleges Employers Association (UCEA) to look into the framework for determining pay and conditions of service in the higher education sector. The Review Committee will report to UCEA and it will be for the employers and unions to respond to any recommendations.

Tuition Fees

Mr. Edwards: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what estimate he has made of the impact of student tuition fees on the recruitment of students aged *(a)* 18 to 21 and *(b)* over 21 years to university degree courses in England and Wales. [84429]

Mr. Mudie *[holding answer 19 May 1999]:* Figures from the Higher Education Statistics Agency show that, using statistical methods comparable to those used in 1997–98, for the 1998–99 academic year the number of home domiciled entrants to undergraduate courses aged under 21 was 216,949, and the number of entrants aged 21 and over was 188,678, respectively a 0.2 per cent. increase and a 0.8 per cent. decrease on 1997–98. These figures, which exclude entrants to Open University courses, indicate that recruitment has been steady over the period when the new tuition fee arrangements were introduced.

LORD CHANCELLOR'S DEPARTMENT

Armed Forces Bill

Mr. Key: To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department if he will make a statement on progress made with revision of the topics identified by the Law Commission in 1995 where consolidation was essential and very desirable in their memorandum to the committee on the Armed Forces Bill in 1996; what additional topics have been so identified since 1996; and if he will make a statement with regard to the recommendations of the report from the Select Committee on the Armed Forces Bill (HC 143, Session 1995–96). [85898]

Mr. Vaz: Consolidation of legislation relating to the sentencing powers of criminal courts is well advanced and should be completed early in 2000; and consolidation of

legislation relating to financial services was well advanced but has been suspended in view of the Government's proposals for reform in that area. No progress has yet been made on consolidation of legislation relating to road traffic regulation or Customs and Excise, and the legislation relating to taxes management is now a matter for the Tax Law ReWrite. The following additional topics have been identified since 1996: Nurses, Midwives and Health Visitors; Audit Commission; Justices of the Peace; Petroleum; and Criminal Appeals. The consolidating legislation on the first four of these has now been passed. It remains the Government's intention to consolidate the Service Discipline Acts at the earliest opportunity.

Service Discipline Acts

Mr. Key: To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department how many senior draftsmen have been employed on consolidation of legislation in respect of *(a)* the Service Discipline Acts and *(b)* other Acts in each year since 1991; and if he will make a statement. [85891]

Mr. Vaz: The numbers of senior Parliamentary Counsel seconded to the Law Commission employed on consolidation of legislation since 1991 are as follows:

Year	*Armed Forces legislation*	*Other legislation*
1992	1	2
1993	1	1
1994	0	1
1995	0	1
1996	1	2
1997	1	0
1998	1	0
1999	0	0

Mr. Key: To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department how many Parliamentary Counsel are currently seconded to the Law Commission for purposes of consolidation bill drafting in connection with *(a)* the Army, Navy and Air Force Discipline Acts, *(b)* work on the next Armed Forces Bill and *(c)* other consolidation measures; and if he will make a statement. [85890]

Mr. Vaz: None of the Parliamentary Counsel currently seconded to the Law Commission was seconded specifically to work on consolidation; none is at present working on consolidation of legislation relating to the Armed Forces; and one is at present assigned to a consolidation of criminal appeals legislation.

Mr. Key: To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department when Law Commission draftsmen commenced work on the consolidation of the Army, Air Force and Naval Discipline Acts; and when they will complete the consolidation. [85889]

Mr. Vaz: Work on this consolidation began at the Law Commission in November 1996. The consolidation is substantially complete, and the timetable for the remaining work will depend on the availability of Parliamentary time.

Children Act 1989

Ms Moran: To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department if he will introduce legislation to amend the Children Act 1989 to include a no-contact clause where there is evidence of domestic violence. [85007]

Mr. Vaz: The Government have no current plans to amend the Children Act 1989. The Act gives the court sufficient discretion to decide whether contact with a non-resident parent would be in the child's best interests, where domestic violence is an issue. The Government support the provision of training and guidance to judges and other family law professionals, to ensure that the statutory framework operates effectively.

National Minimum Wage

Mr. Rowlands: To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department how many people in his Department and its associated bodies and agencies have benefited from the introduction of a national minimum wage. [86084]

Mr. Vaz: This reply covers the Headquarters of the Lord Chancellor's Department (with Associated Offices), the Court Service, the Public Trust Office, the Land Registry, the Public Record Office, the Northern Ireland Court Service and the Legal Aid Board.

102 staff (all casuals in the Court Service working outside London) have received pay increases as a result of the introduction of the National Minimum Wage on 1 April 1999.

Personal Injury Claims

Mr. Dismore: To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department what plans he has to consult on the calculation of future pecuniary loss in personal injury claims. [85713]

Mr. Vaz: The Government plan to issue a consultation paper on what rate might be set under Section 1 of the Damages Act to guide courts' decisions on the discount rate to be applied to lump sum awards. We anticipate using this consultation to invite views on alternatives to lump sum payments of compensation. Anyone who wishes to comment on arrangements for calculating future pecuniary loss may use this opportunity to do so.

Written Answers to Questions

Wednesday 9 June 1999

ENVIRONMENT, TRANSPORT AND THE REGIONS

Genetically Modified Crops

Mr. Baker: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will publish the agreement which he has negotiated for the management of the farm-scale trials of genetically modified crops in 1999. [85924]

Mr. Meacher *[holding answer 8 June 1999]:* All crops in the farm-scale evaluations are being grown in compliance with the conditions of the consents issued under Part B or Part C of Directive 90/220/EEC and, in addition, in accordance with the SCIMAC (Supply Chain Initiative on Modified Agricultural Crops) guidelines. The SCIMAC code of practice together with the associated guidelines for growing newly developed herbicide tolerant crops was published by SCIMAC on 21 May 1999 and a copy has been placed in the Library.

National Speed Policy

Mr. Peter Bradley: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions (1) if he will make a statement on the Government's national speed policy review; [86053]

(2) when the national speed policy review is to be concluded; when the Government plan to announce the findings of the national speed policy review; and when the Government plan to announce their proposals for changes to speed limits. [86055]

Ms Glenda Jackson: The speed policy review was launched in October 1998. This is considering how best policy can reflect the aims of the integrated transport policy white paper, whilst continuing to meet our road safety objectives. In its first stage the review is examining existing research and reviewing current practice and legislation. The second stage is now underway involving people and organisations outside government that can offer an informed opinion. The final stage will draw conclusions before a report is prepared for Ministers.

The review will consider all aspects of speed management, including the role of speed limits. It is expected to be completed by the Autumn, when its findings will be published.

Mr. Peter Bradley: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions how many and what proportion of settlements of less than 3,000 in population have (i) no signed speed restrictions and (ii) a maximum speed limit of *(a)* 40 mph, *(b)* 30 mph and *(c)* 20 mph. [86114]

Ms Glenda Jackson: This information is not held centrally as Local Traffic Authorities are responsible for setting speed limits on their roads.

Mr. Peter Bradley: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions how many respondents to the consultation document, "Developing an Integrated Transport Policy: An Invitation to Contribute", recommended lower speed limits. [86054]

Ms Glenda Jackson: Of the 7,300 responses to the consultation document, "Developing an Integrated Transport Policy: An Invitation to Contribute", 827 recommended increased traffic calming measures and lower speed limits.

Mr. Peter Bradley: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what representations the Government have received in the course of the national speed policy review on the need to reduce speed limits in country lanes and in villages. [86056]

Ms Glenda Jackson: A wide range of views on this issue have been received, both for and against the need to reduce such speed limits.

Refrigerants

Mrs. Brinton: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will make it his policy to change departmental refrigeration and air-conditioning systems to operate on not-in-kind refrigerants. [86164]

Ms Glenda Jackson: It is DETR policy, in accordance with the model framework for greening government operations, not to purchase substances that contain CFCs or HCFCs where suitable alternatives exist. The specifications for the build and refurbishment of Eland and Ashdown House Victoria specifically excluded the use of ozone depleting gases.

Drink-driving

Mr. Kidney: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions how many road users were killed in drink-drive related accidents during the last year for which figures are available. [85690]

Ms Glenda Jackson: In 1997, the most recent year for which estimates of drink-drive accidents are available, there were an estimated 550 alcohol-related road deaths (or fatalities). This is a revision of the provisional estimate of 540, based on more limited data, which was published in "Road Accidents Great Britain:1997".

Mr. Kidney: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will list the main issues addressed in responses to his Department's consultation on "Combating Drinking and Driving: Next Steps". [85689]

Ms Glenda Jackson: Consultees made comments across the range of issues addressed in the consultation paper. Those issues most frequently raised were, in descending order, the lowering of the blood alcohol limit, police breath testing powers, penalties for a drink-drive limit and self-test breathalysers.

British Rail Land (Battersea)

Mr. Linton: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions when a decision will be made on the sale of British Rail land to the Dogs' Home, Battersea. [86241]

Ms Glenda Jackson: The British Railways Board was given permission on 20 May to dispose of its surplus land at Battersea to the Dogs' Home.

Energy Efficiency

Joan Ruddock: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions how many homes have benefited from Government-sponsored programmes of energy efficiency in each year since their establishment. [86206]

Mr. Meacher: The Department provides grants for improving the energy efficiency of homes through the Home Energy Efficiency Scheme and also funds the grant programmes operated by the Energy Saving Trust. The number of homes helped through each are detailed.

Homes improved through the Home Energy Efficiency Scheme

Year	*Number of homes improved*
1991–92	167,849
1992–93	204,130
1993–94	270,148
1994–95	449,902
1995–96	623,963
1996–97	415,422
1997–98	419,935
1998–99	404,960

Homes improved through DETR funded programmes operated by the Energy Saving Trust

Programme	*1996–97*	*1997–98*	*1998–99*
Energy Efficiency Advice Centres	109,954	166,744	181,599
HECA Action[1]	37	31	30
Energy Service Companies[1]	2	7	20
Raising the Standard	6,000	9,000	12,110
Heating Controls	16,725	17,500	n/a
Cavity Wall Insulation	30,000	35,000	22,747
Pensioners Energy Plan	48	65	25
Total	162,766	228,347	216,531

[1] Grants to organisations rather than individual households

The energy efficiency of many homes has also been improved through earlier Government programmes; the introduction of energy efficiency requirements within building regulations; and from broader programmes to promote energy efficiency including the Market Transformation Strategy and the high profile "Are You Doing Your Bit" campaign.

At the same time, schemes developed as part of the Standards of Performance set by the Director General for Electricity have also improved the energy efficiency of homes.

Mr. Boswell: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what plans he has for introducing *(a)* energy efficiency and *(b)* renewable energy strategies at regional level. [86044]

Mr. Meacher *[holding answer 8 June 1999]:* Our recent White Paper on sustainable development, "A better quality of life", announced that we wish to see sustainable development frameworks prepared in each English region by the end of 2000. We will be issuing guidance on the content and preparation of such frameworks. Renewable energy and energy efficiency are among the subjects which we are considering for inclusion in the frameworks. Additionally, as indicated in the consultation paper, "New and Renewable Energy: Prospects for the 21 Century", recently published by my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry, renewable energy is a topic we will be considering in the context of our new proposals for Regional Planning Guidance, on which we have been consulting.

Petrol

Ms Walley: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what recent scientific evidence he has evaluated concerning the use of methyl teritary butyl ether in petrol in the United Kingdom; and if he will make a statement. [85870]

Ms Glenda Jackson: Use of Methyl tertiary butyl ether (MTBE) in petrol can reduce exhaust emissions of carbon monoxide by 25 per cent. and hydrocarbons by 15 per cent. and has contributed to improvements in air quality through reducing the level of these pollutants. In response to concerns about possible contamination of groundwater by MTBE the Environment Agency conducted a pilot study in the Stour catchment to inform the design of future groundwater monitoring. No MTBE was detected in that catchment but MTBE will be included in a major R&D study commissioned by the Agency into the fate, transport and natural attenuation of chemicals in the sub-surface and groundwater environment. The study, which commences this week, will take some two years to complete.

Empty Dwellings

Helen Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what changes to the council tax he intends to make to encourage owners of long-term empty dwellings to bring them back into use. [86487]

Ms Armstrong: One of the reasons why there is a hard core of unused empty dwellings is that the cost of owning them is relatively low. At present, there is no council tax at all for the owners of dwellings which require or are undergoing major repair works or structural alterations. Long-term empty properties create extra costs for councils because they can encourage vandalism, crime, accumulation of rubbish, vermin and a general nuisance. Exempt from council tax, the owners do not make a contribution towards these costs and they also benefit from other locally provided services like police and fire services.

The Government do not believe this is justified where a dwelling has been exempt for more than a year. We have, therefore, amended the council tax regulations so that from 1 April 2000, any dwelling in England and Wales requiring or undergoing major repair works or structural alterations which has been exempt for more than a year, will be subject to the standard 50 per cent. council tax attracted by other unoccupied dwellings.

Contaminated Land

Mr. Gapes: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what proposals he has to provide financial support to English local authorities and to the Environment Agency to meet the capital costs of dealing with contaminated land. [86489]

Mr. Meale: My right hon. Friend the Minister for the Environment announced on 22 July 1998 that £15 million would be available for this financial year, and each of the next two financial years. The Contaminated Land Supplementary Credit Approval programme provides support for English local authorities for the capital costs they incur in dealing with contaminated land. The programme also supports, in the form of additional grant-in-aid, the Environment Agency where it is carrying out works to deal with water pollution caused by contaminated land. This funding is in addition to the £50 million over the next three years to help local authorities with their responsibilities under Part IIA of the Environmental Protection Act 1990 (inserted by section 57 of the Environment Act 1995) and to separate funds made available through Single Regeneration Budget and the Regional Development Agencies for regeneration projects.

Authorities with on-going contractual commitments for projects funded in previous years have already received notification that support will continue to be available this year. I have agreed the programme for new projects to start this year and my Department has written today to the successful authorities and to the Environment Agency notifying them of the financial allocations which are being made.

The Department will discuss the other bids with the authorities concerned and expects to make some further allocations. It will also decide new bids when they are received.

The following table sets out the allocations which have been made so far this current financial year.

Local Authorities	*Number of sites*	*Total allocation (£)*
Ashford BC	1	36,500
Bexley LB	1	50,000
Blackburn/Darwen BC	2	40,000
Bolton MBC	1	20,000
Bristol City	1	25,697
Bury MBC	1	5,500
Calderdale MBC	1	20,000
Chorley BC	1	196,000
Crawley BC	1	355,500
Croydon LB	5	79,000
Cumbria CC	1	786,215
Darlington BC	1	31,000
Devon CC	5	775,500
Dudley MBC	4	335,070
Durham CC	3	56,500
East Sussex CC	2	282,696
Essex CC	3	140,500
Gateshead MBC	2	1,205,000
Gedling BC	1	14,000
Gravesham BC	1	11,300
Guildford BC	4	35,500
Hackney LB	1	115,000
Hampshire CC	1	35,000
Herefordshire C	1	22,600
Isle of Wight C	1	10,000
Lancashire CC	1	25,000
Lancaster City	1	71,653
Leicester City	6	119,200
Leicestershire CC	2	16,250
Lewes DC	1	10,000
Merseyside WDA	2	320,000
Middlesbrough BC	1	301,000
Newcastle City	3	319,450
Northamptonshire CC	2	408,000
North East Lincs C	1	44,000
North Lincs C	1	1,187,200
North Somerset C	1	18,000
Northumberland CC	4	46,000
Norwich City	1	24,000
Nottingham City	1	304,000
Oldham MBC	2	96,000
Oxfordshire CC	2	392,000
Plymouth City	1	265,085
Portsmouth City	1	400,000
Preston BC	1	266,250
Rotherham MBC	3	219,407
St. Helens MBC	1	165,000
Sandwell MBC	17	73,660
Sheffield City	1	150,000
Shropshire CC	1	378,814
Solihull MBC	1	179,247
South Holland DC	1	2,500
Surrey CC	2	11,100
Tameside MBC	2	42,160
Teignbridge DC	2	70,000
Trafford MBC	3	150,000
Warrington BC	1	242,806
Wokingham DC	1	208,096
Worcestershire CC	2	58,831
Environment Agency	9	1,362,000

NORTHERN IRELAND

Transport Funding

Mr. Donaldson: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland what changes have been made by the Department of the Environment (N.I.) to the funding made available to *(a)* the Northern Ireland Transport Holding Company and its subsidiaries and *(b)* the NI Roads Programme in (i) 1998 and (ii) 1999. [85958]

Mr. Paul Murphy *[holding answer 8 June 1999]:* The information for the financial years 1998–99 and 1999–2000 requested is as follows:

£000

	Approved allocation for 1998–99	*Provisional outturn for 1998–99*	*Present approved allocation for 1999–2000*
Northern Ireland Transport Holding Company and its subsidiaries	27.21	28.77	29.79
NI Roads Programme	145.30	147.7	155.6

Business Development Service

Mr. Browne: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland what key performance targets have been set for the Business Development Service to be achieved by April 2000. [86488]

Mr. Paul Murphy: The Business Development Service is an Executive Agency of the Department of Finance and Personnel. I have set a number of key performance targets for the Agency to achieve by April 2000, as follows:

- to maintain a level of at least 90 per cent. of customers to be satisfied with the services that they have received;
- to maintain a level of at least 90 per cent. of customers to be satisfied with the way in which services were provided to them;
- to achieve levels of efficiency savings in total running costs of 3 per cent. over the allocation for 1998–99;
- to demonstrate, on a notional basis and within the context of service level agreements (where these apply), that the Agency would recover the full cost of its operations from its customers; and
- to maintain systems of people development consistent with good human resource practice.

Copies of the Agency's Strategic and Business Plans for 1999 to 2002 have been placed in the Library.

Contract Compliance

Mr. McNamara: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland, pursuant to her answer of 26 January 1999, *Official Report*, column *191*, what advice was received by Ministers on the legal permissibility of the Standing Advisory Commission on Human Rights' recommendations on contract compliance under European law; if she subsequently sought legal opinion on contract compliance; and if she will make a statement. [86137]

Mr. Ingram: My reply of 26 January indicated the input of legal advisers to consideration of the recommendations in the Standing Advisory Commission for Human Rights' report on employment equality of June 1997. Subsequent to publication of the Government's response to those recommendations in the White Paper, "Partnership for Equality" (CM 3890) in March 1998, the Secretary of State has not sought further legal opinion on contract compliance.

West Midlands Police

Mr. McNamara: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland how many members of the West Midlands police force have spent time on secondment with the RUC in the past 10 years; what was the average length of time spent on secondment; and what was the purpose of these placements. [86143]

Mr. Ingram: In the last 10 years, two members of the West Midlands police force have been seconded to the Royal Ulster Constabulary for a period of six months each. These placements were part of a Management Exchange with RUC officers for the career development of the individuals concerned.

RUC Officers (Paramilitary Connections)

Mr. McNamara: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland what powers are available to the Chief Constable of the RUC to take disciplinary action against officers joining or associating with paramilitary organisations; who is responsible for discipline among police officers from England and Wales serving in the RUC on secondment; and who has responsibility for informing her if a police officer on secondment to the RUC has paramilitary associations. [86144]

Mr. Ingram: The Chief Constable's powers to take disciplinary action against a member of the RUC below the rank of Assistant Chief Constable are provided for in the Royal Ulster Constabulary (Discipline and Disciplinary Appeals) Regulations 1988.

The Chief Constable, or Police Authority for senior officers, is responsible for the discipline of police officers from England and Wales on secondment with the Royal Ulster Constabulary. The Chief Constable is also responsible for the investigation of criminal matters and, except for senior officers, for police discipline.

Barry Mason

Mr. McNamara: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland if she has received a report of the evidence given in the course of the legal action against former chief superintendent Barry Mason of the West Midlands police that concluded on 22 April. [86145]

Mr. Ingram: Yes.

LORD CHANCELLOR'S DEPARTMENT

Claims Assessors

Mr. Linton: To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department what action he intends to take to investigate the activities of non-legally qualified claims assessors. [86390]

Mr. Vaz: The Lord Chancellor intends to establish a small committee to investigate the provision of legal advice by non-legally qualified persons who act as claims assessors, whose business is to process claims, on behalf of clients, arising as a result of death or personal injury. In particular, the committee will examine the sector's cost, standard, appropriateness and customer satisfaction. The committee will report its findings and make recommendations on whether any further control of this sector is needed in the public interest.

Advisory Board on Family Law

Mr. Linton: To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department when the Advisory Board on Family Law intends to publish its second annual report. [86389]

Mr. Vaz: The Advisory Board on Family Law published its second annual report on 27 May and copies have been placed in the Library of the House.

TREASURY

European Employment Pact

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if he will place in the Library a copy of the European Presidency's draft for a European Employment Pact, as discussed at ECOFIN on 10 May. [85524]

Ms Hewitt: The European Presidency text on a European Employment Pact as agreed at the Cologne Council has been placed in the Library this afternoon.

HIPC Trust Fund

Dr. Cable: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what discussions he has had with his counterparts in other G7 countries regarding their Governments' contributions to the Heavily Indebted Poor Countries Trust Fund; and if he will make a statement. [85719]

Ms Hewitt: The Chancellor has discussed the HIPC trust fund with all his G7 colleagues and will be discussing these issues further at the G7 in Frankfurt this weekend.

Debt Burden

Dr. Cable: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what agreement was reached at the last G7 Finance Ministers' Meeting on reducing the debt burden of the poorest countries; and if he will make a statement. [85718]

Ms Hewitt: G7 Finance Ministers last met on 26 April. Paragraph 11 of their statement, a copy of which has been placed in the Library of the House, set out the conclusions of the meeting.

The UK is continuing to argue for faster, deeper and wider debt relief.

Recognised Overseas Investment Exchange

Ms Lawrence: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what plans he has to increase the fees Her Majesty's Treasury currently charges to applicants for Recognised Overseas Investment Exchange status or Recognised Overseas Clearing House status under sections 112 and 113 of the Financial Services Act 1986. [86617]

Ms Hewitt: The application fee will be increased to £33,000 and the periodical fee will be increased to £9,000 with effect from 1 July 1999.

Diesel Fuel Prices

Mr. Heathcoat-Amory: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer by how many pence per litre the price of a litre of diesel has risen since May 1997. [84914]

Ms Hewitt *[holding answer 21 May 1999]:* The price of diesel in May 1997 was published in the DTI's 1998 Digest of Energy Statistics, table 8.12. The latest price, for April 1999, was published in a DTI press notice, "Statistical Press Release, Advance Energy Statistics", on 5 May 1999.

DEFENCE

Kosovo

Mr. Laurence Robertson: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will make a statement regarding the pay received by British soldiers who are on duty in and around Kosovo. [85650]

Mr. Doug Henderson *[holding answer 8 June 1999]:* UK Service personnel deployed to the Balkans are paid in accordance with their rank, length of service and, in the case of other ranks, their trade, at rates recommended by the independent Armed Forces Pay Review Body (AFPRB). Where appropriate, personnel also receive additional pay in recognition of their specialist skills or service, ie flying pay or parachute pay, at rates also recommended by the AFPRB.

The AFPRB make their recommendations on the basic pay of all members of the Armed Forces on the basis of broad comparability with the pay of civilian occupations of similar job weight and responsibility within the UK. To this basic pay is then added an additional element called the 'X-Factor' (currently 12 per cent. of basic pay) to reflect the differences between conditions of service experienced by members of the Armed Forces over a full career and conditions in civilian life, which cannot be taken directly into account in assessing pay comparability. Part of the AFPRB's considerations in determining the X-Factor includes the liability to serve from time to time in difficult and dangerous circumstances. The 'X-Factor' is paid continuously to all Service personnel, apart from the most senior officers, throughout their careers regardless of where they are serving, and it is pensionable. This mechanism is so constructed to ensure our continuing ability to recruit and retain personnel of the right calibre and reflects the fact that the UK's Armed Forces have an expectation of world wide deployment.

RAF Quedgeley

Mr. Drew: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what planning permissions have been sought for RAF Quedgeley; and what is their current status. [85885]

Mr. Spellar *[holding answer 8 June 1999]:* The areas formerly known as Sites 2 and 4, which are located to the south of the Main Site, and Site 6, located close to the A38, have now been sold as land for storage purposes.

No planning permission has yet been sought for Main Site, Quedgeley as this will be a matter for the Purchaser. However, my Department has made representation at the recent Gloucestershire County Structure Plan Examination in Public and has consulted on a regular basis with Gloucester City Council about proposed uses for the site.

Equipment Budgets

Mr. Keith Simpson: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what is the overspend for the (i) land equipment budget, (ii) sea equipment budget and (iii) air equipment budget in the present financial year. [85916]

Mr. Spellar *[holding answer 8 June 1999]:* The Defence budget for the present financial year, 1999–2000, is not currently overspent in any main budget area.

Royal Hospital, Haslar

Mr. Viggers: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence how many letters he has received concerning the future of Defence Medical Services; and of these, how many opposed the closure of the Royal Hospital, Haslar. [85553]

Mr. Doug Henderson *[holding answer 8 June 1999]:* My Department, including the Defence Secondary Care Agency, has received over 500 letters concerning the Defence Medical Services and the future of the Royal Hospital, Haslar. This figure includes letters to the Prime Minister and the Secretaries of State for Health and Transport which were passed to my Department for reply. The majority of these letters referred to the Royal Hospital, Haslar and all were opposed to its closure.

Service Children's Education

Mrs. Dean: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what key targets have been set for the Chief Executive of Service Children's Education for the financial year 1999–2000. [86700]

Mr. Spellar: The Chief Executive has been set the following Key Targets for 1999–2000:

1. To meet the following percentage of pupils achieving Level 2 at the end of Key Stage 1 in:
   Reading: 87 per cent.
   Writing: 90 per cent.
   Spelling: 73 per cent.
   Mathematics: 91 per cent.
2. To meet the following percentage of pupils achieving Level 4 at the end of Key Stage 2 in:
   English: 75 per cent.
   Mathematics: 75 per cent.
   Science: 80 per cent.
3. To meet the following percentage of pupils achieving Level 5 at the end of Key Stage 3 in:
   English: 81 per cent.
   Mathematics: 70 per cent.
   Science: 70 per cent.
4. To meet a three year rolling average percentage of Year 11 pupils in SCE achieving five or more higher (A*–C*) grades in GCSE of 46 per cent.
5. To meet a three year rolling average of subject entries achieving passes at grades A-C at A level of 57 per cent.
6. To achieve as a minimum a "satisfactory" standard in each OFSTED school inspection.
7. To respond in full to customers seeking educational advice from SCE(UK) within the following timescales:
   91 per cent. within 10 working days of receipt
   remainder within 20 working days of receipt
8. To develop an Agency Efficiency Index by 2000–01.
9. To achieve index of satisfaction with SCE within the Army Spouses Continuous Attitude Survey above 360 overall.

Nuclear Weapons

Ms Stuart: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what plans he has to ensure the future integrity of the UK's nuclear weapon stockpile in the absence of underground weapon testing. [86701]

Mr. George Robertson: I announced in the Strategic Defence Review that for as long as the United Kingdom has nuclear forces we will ensure that we have a robust capability to underwrite the integrity of our nuclear warheads without recourse to nuclear testing. As part of that I have approved investment in the US National Ignition Facility (NIF). This will guarantee the United Kingdom access to a high-powered laser, which is a key element of our stewardship programme. Participation in the NIF will be a joint venture under the auspices of the 1958 UK/US Mutual Defence Agreement.

Defence Analytical Services Agency

Ms Kelly: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what key targets have been set for the Chief Executive of the Defence Analytical Services Agency for financial year 1999–2000. [86702]

Mr. Doug Henderson: Key Targets have been set for the Chief Executive of the Defence Analytical Services Agency for Financial Year 1999–2000. The targets build on the progress already made by the Agency since it formed in 1992 and are as follows:

Delivery of customer service and quality

The majority of the Agency's business is covered by Service Level Agreements with customers, which set out the targets for timeliness and quality of work. For the parts of the business where Service Level Agreements are inappropriate, project agreements are in place. The Agency is committed to a continual improvement in the range and quality of the services it provides to customers. Key Targets are:

(a) To meet at least 95 per cent. of the timeliness and quality targets set in Service Level Agreement and project agreements.

(b) To have at least 90 per cent. of customers saying they are at least satisfied with the timeliness, quality of work and helpfulness of staff in the Annual Customer Satisfaction Survey covering all aspects of business.

(c) To have at least 25 per cent. of customers who received DASA services in 1998–99 and 1999–2000 report an improvement in those services in the Annual Customer Satisfaction Survey.

(d) To develop corporate information on civilian personnel and make it available to civilian personnel managers by March 2000.

Efficiency and business excellence

The Agency plans to make efficiency savings in 1999–2000 as well as meeting the additional demands placed on it by new Departmental studies and initiatives. The Agency is committed to continual improvement and is using the Business Excellence Model as a means of driving this forward. Key Targets are:

(a) To achieve a British Quality Foundation validated score of 500 points or more against the Business Excellence Model.

(b) To achieve Investors in People re-accreditation by the end of March 2000.

(c) To deliver efficiency savings with a value of 1 per cent. of the initial running cost allocation, as the first instalment of a programme to achieve 10 per cent. efficiency savings over 3 years.

AS90 Howitzer

Dr. Ladyman: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what progress has been made with regard to placing a contract for the Extended Range Ordnance and Modular Charge System for the AS90 howitzer. [86703]

Mr. George Robertson: I am pleased to announce that a contract for the final development and production of extended range barrels and a new Modular Charge System for the AS90 self-propelled gun has been placed with Marconi Electronic Systems. This programme will extend the range and increase the effectiveness of AS90, and will

provide a significantly enhanced artillery capability for the British Army. The contract will sustain about 50 jobs with Marconi at Barrow-in-Furness and at the Royal Ordnance factory in Nottingham, which will manufacture the extended range barrels. The Modular Charge System will be supplied by Somchem of South Africa. The total value of the contract with Marconi is around £75 million.

Learning Forces Initiative

Mr. Crausby: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will make a statement on progress towards establishing the Learning Forces Initiative announced in the Strategic Defence Review. [86704]

Mr. Doug Henderson: In April Standard Learning Credits were introduced which increased by 25 per cent. the financial assistance available annually for Service personnel to undertake education for personal development. Enhanced Learning Credits will be introduced next year. This major new scheme will provide a substantial source of funding for personal development both during service in the Armed Forces and for up to 10 years thereafter.

Training Group Defence Agency

Ms Walley: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what key targets have been set for the Chief Executive of the Training Group Defence Agency for financial year 1999–2000. [86705]

Mr. Doug Henderson: Key Targets have been set for the Chief Executive of the Training Group Defence Agency for the Financial Year 1999–2000 as follows:

Key Target 1—Quantity of Output (ab initio Flying Training)

The number of RAF aircrew trainees graduated as follows:

KT1a—Number of trainees graduating from ab initio flying training	*Performance level*
Fast-Jet Pilots	59
Multi-Engine Pilots	46
Rotary Wing Pilots	33
Fast-Jet Navigators	24
Multi-Engine Navigators	11
Rotary Wing Navigators	14
Airman Aircrew	78

The number of RAF trainees who graduate from the following courses:

KT1b—Quantity of output (ab initio ground training)	*Performance level*
Officer Training	282
RAF Tradesman Training	1,827
RAF Regiment Gunner Training	395

The number of training places provided on the following RN, Army, RAF refresher, CFS and Foreign and Commonwealth flying courses:

KT1c—Quantity of output flying (other customers and refresher training)	*Performance level*
Flying Training—RN, Army, RAF Refresher and CFS	819
Flying Training Courses—F&C	83

Number of training places provided on Ground courses:

KT1d—Quantity of output ground (pre-employment and career development training)	*Performance level*
RAF Pre-employment and Career Development Training	25,417

Key Target 2—Quality of Output

To achieve a rating of satisfactory in the Agency's customer satisfaction matrix for the quality of 100 per cent. of graduate trainees.

Key Target 3—Efficiency

To deliver 2.36 per cent. efficiency savings from allocated budget.

Key Target 4—Development of Output Costings and Unit cost measurement

To provide full output costings and associated unit cost and efficiency measures by April 2000.

HOME DEPARTMENT

Drug Orders

Mr. Clappison: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many drug treatment and testing orders he has forecast to be made in his financial plans for the first full year of their operation. [85766]

Mr. George Howarth: Our current best estimate of the unit cost of a Drug Treatment and Testing Order (DTTO) is £6,400. On that basis, the funds allocated should allow probation services to fund treatment and testing of approximately 6,000 offenders sentenced to DTTOs in 2001–02. The pilot evaluation report will provide accurate information on the unit cost and, therefore, the number of DTTOs that can be made each year.

Mr. Clappison: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what is the average length of a drug treatment and testing order imposed in the three pilot areas. [85769]

Mr. George Howarth: As at June 1999, the average length of a Drug Treatment and Testing Order in

(a) Croydon is 16.8 months;

(b) Gloucestershire is 12.9 months; and

(c) Liverpool is 12.9 months.

London River Police

Mr. Cohen: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what will be *(a)* the establishment and *(b)* actual numbers of officers in post of the London River Police on 1 January 2000; and if he will make a statement. [86036]

Kate Hoey: The Commissioner of Police of the Metropolis tells me that the target strength for the Thames Division on 1 January 2000 will be 89 officers and that he expects that number to be in post then. At the moment the strength is 101.

Mr. Cohen: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what assessment he has made of the staffing requirement of the London River Police over the Millennium public holiday; and if he will make a statement. [86037]

Kate Hoey: The deployment of officers in the Thames Division of the Metropolitan Police is an operational matter for the Commissioner. He tells me that during the Millennium public holiday he expects that the full strength of the Division, 89 officers, will be deployed on a 24-hour shift pattern. The deployment of resources will be kept under review, and altered as necessary if new events related to the Millennium are planned.

Criminal Records Bureau

Mr. Laurence Robertson: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what plans he has to amend Part V of the Police Act 1997 regarding the Criminal Records Bureau; what time scale he envisages for reform; and if he will make a statement. [85904]

Mr. Boateng: The Protection of Children Bill, currently before Parliament, aims to amend Part V of the Police Act 1997 so as to permit the Criminal Records Bureau to act as a "one stop shop" for criminal record information and information contained in the Department for Education and Employment's List 99 and the Department of Health's Consultancy Index.

I have no plans for other amendments to Part V.

CRE Annual Report

Mrs. Humble: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department when he plans to make available the Commission for Racial Equality's 1998 annual report; and if he will make a statement. [86621]

Mr. Straw: I have arranged for copies of the Commission for Racial Equality's 1998 report which is being published today to be placed in the Library.

The report demonstrates the Commission's commitment to making racial equality a reality in Britain and shows how it is playing a positive role to promote the importance of equal opportunities.

Asylum Seekers

Mr. Gardiner: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what plans he has to change the support arrangements for the families of asylum seekers; and if he will make a statement. [86622]

Mr. Straw: The Government are determined to deliver an immigration and asylum system which is fairer, faster and firmer. The Immigration and Asylum Bill is key to achieving this goal. The new arrangements contained in the Bill will provide a coherent national support system for asylum seekers, including families with children.

The Bill has been carefully scrutinised by a Special Standing Committee which took evidence as well as considering it clause by clause. I am very grateful to all the hon. Members who took part in this Committee. In the light of issues raised, I am making the following changes:

I have today tabled amendments to the Immigration and Asylum Bill to make clear that the Home Secretary will be under a new duty to meet the accommodation and essential living needs of destitute asylum seeker families. The assistance they receive in this way will be comparable to what would otherwise be available under section 17 of the Children Act 1989. All other safeguards for children contained in that Act will continue to apply. Linked with the commitment we have already made to provide 24 hour emergency cover for such families, these measures will ensure that the children of asylum seekers receive the same kind of protection as other children enjoy.

I have also reviewed the balance between cash and vouchers in the resources to be made available to asylum seekers for living expenses, and have concluded that a cash allowance of £10 per person per week is justifiable for both adults and children. This would mean that, at the present illustrative support rates, a family of four would receive £40 per week in cash, and a further £50 of spending power by way of vouchers.

In the White Paper, "Fairer, Faster and Firmer" the Government set a target of delivering, by April 2001, most initial asylum decisions within two months and most appeals in a further four months. In respect of families with children, I have decided to bring forward this target to April 2000. From that date, our aim will be to deliver initial decisions on new asylum applications in such cases in an average of two months. Average waiting times for appeals are already below four months. Our intention is to maintain this for the future for all categories of cases. If we cannot achieve these targets for families with children, we will not bring these applications into the new support arrangements in April 2000. We will only do so when we are satisfied that the targets for these cases can be met. For those people who remain on the support arrangements for more than six months through no fault of their own, we shall be introducing an additional discretionary payment to assist with the cost of any replacement items they may need.

These changes, together with the other amendments that I am tabling today, will strengthen the Bill and ensure that the Government's objectives are achieved.

Immigration and Nationality Directorate

Mr. Healey: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he has received the annual report for 1998 of the Complaints Audit Committee of the Immigration and Nationality Directorate; and if he will make a statement. [86623]

Mr. Straw: A copy of the report has been placed in the Library. It is a useful and informative document and I am grateful to the Committee for its comments and its recommendations which will all be followed up. The report also includes details of the broadening of the Committee's terms of reference to encompass quality of service issues.

Pelargonic Acid Vanillyamide

Mr. Flynn: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will list the scientific references used to ascertain the safety of pelargonic acid vanillyamide, as a replacement for CS spray. [85856]

Mr. Boateng: I am aware of no published reports relating to the safety of pelargonic acid vanillyamide (PAVA), although some private research on the subject has been commissioned by Hertfordshire Constabulary. The Home Office Police Scientific Development Branch considers that the information currently available is not sufficient to allow the use of PAVA as an incapacitant in the United Kingdom at present.

Pre-inquest Disclosure

Mr. McNamara: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department, pursuant to his answer of 20 May 1999, *Official Report*, column *434*, what guidance has been issued to the police on pre-inquest disclosure to relatives of the deceased. [86139]

Mr. Straw: On 28 April 1999, a Home Office circular was issued to Chief Officers of Police advising them, where there has been a death in police custody, to make arrangements for the pre-inquest disclosure of documentary evidence to interested persons.

The guidance advises Chief Officers that there should be as great a degree of openness as possible, and that disclosure of documentary material to interested persons before the inquest hearing should be normal practice in cases of death in police custody and death arising from fatal road crashes involving the police. The guidance also states that in all cases, Chief Officers will want to consider whether there are compelling reasons why certain documents, or parts of documents, may not be disclosed. But there should always be a presumption in favour of openness. A copy of the circular has been placed in the Library.

Firearms

Mr. William Ross: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many people were *(a)* killed and *(b)* injured by (i) hand guns, (ii) air guns, (iii) shot guns, (iv) rifles over .22 calibre, (v) rifles of .22 calibre, (vi) submachine guns and (vii) other firearms in each of the last five years indicating how many of the deaths and injuries were (a) accidental, (b) non-accidental and (c) self-inflicted by legally held firearms. [85866]

Mr. Boateng: Information obtained from the Office for National Statistics shows the following number of accidental deaths by shooting, broken down by the available type of gun for the years 1994 to 1998:

Accidental deaths by shooting, England and Wales, 1994–98

	Hand gun	Shot gun	Military firearm	Other firearm	Total
1994	2	4	1	3	10
1995	1	6	—	5	12
1996	—	3	—	4	7
1997	1	4	—	1	6
1998	1	5	1	1	8

Information is not available on the number of accidental injuries caused by firearms.

Deaths and injuries caused by the use of firearms in crime are as follows:

Notifiable offences recorded by the police in which firearms caused injury, England and Wales, 1993–97

	Hand gun	Shot gun	Air/ weapon	Other firearm	Total
Fatal injury					
1993	35	39	—	—	74
1994	25	36	—	5	66
1995	39	28	1	2	70
1996	30	17	—	2	49
1997	39	16	—	4	59

Notifiable offences recorded by the police in which firearms caused injury, England and Wales, 1993–97

	Hand gun	Shot gun	Air/ weapon	Other firearm	Total
Other injury					
1993	358	180	1,578	158	2,274
1994	292	143	1,591	149	2,175
1995	260	118	1,409	199	1,986
1996	249	87	1,212	384	1,932
1997	275	55	1,194	389	1,913

Source:
Home Office

Figures for 1998 are not yet available.

Information obtained from the Office for National Statistics shows the following number of suicides by shooting, broken down by the available type of gun for the years 1994 to 1998:

Suicides[1] by shooting, England and Wales, 1994–98

	Hand gun	Shot gun	Military firearm	Other firearm	Total
1994	4	80	—	80	164
1995	3	68	1	88	160
1996	1	72	2	70	145
1997	—	59	—	57	116
1998	3	65	—	61	129

[1] Includes also cases where an open verdict was recorded where the harm was likely to have been self-inflicted but where there was insufficient evidence to prove that the deceased deliberately intended to kill themselves

Information is not available on the number of self-inflicted injuries caused by firearms.

Only in the case of the fatal injuries caused by the use of firearms in crime is any information held as to whether the firearm was legally held or not. The results of a special survey covering the years 1992 to 1994 showed that in cases where it was known whether the firearm was legally held or not, (151 cases out of 196) in 23 cases (15 per cent.) the firearm was legally held.

SCOTLAND

Forestry Commission Research Agency

Mr. Browne: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland what targets have been set for the Forestry Commission Research Agency for the current financial year. [86712]

Dr. Reid: The Forestry Commission Research Agency has been set the following targets:

To achieve a customer satisfaction rating of at least 95 per cent.

To increase the output of peer-reviewed scientific papers submitted and subsequently accepted for publication by 8 per cent. on the 1998–99 target.

To achieve a 2 per cent. real reduction in the weighted average unit cost of support services and to hold weighted average charge for a researcher day at 1998–99 levels.

To achieve an operating surplus of at least £450,000.

Copies of the agency's Business Plan, which contains more detail about these targets, have been placed in the Library.

EDUCATION AND EMPLOYMENT

Remploy

Dr. Naysmith: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what targets he has set Remploy in its 1999–2000 Annual Performance Agreement. [86330]

Ms Hodge: I have, on behalf of my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Education and Employment, written to the Chairman of Remploy approving the 1999–2000 Annual Performance Agreement between the Department and the Company. This agreement covers the year from 1 April 1999. It has been negotiated by the Chief Executive of the Employment Service on behalf of my right hon. Friend. The targets are:

the average number of disabled people employed by Remploy Ltd. will be 10,150

the average number of disabled people employed under the Interwork scheme will be 3,800

the average number of progressions will increase to 400

Remploy Ltd. will keep within a total unit cost target (operating deficit per disabled worker) of £9,700

Remploy Ltd. will reduce its factory operating deficit to a maximum £81.0 million.

I have today arranged for the text of the Annual Performance Agreement to be placed in the Library.

HEALTH

Government-funded Research Programme

Mr. Paul Marsden: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will list the Government-funded research programme, showing *(a)* the research organisation, *(b)* the funding and *(c)* the research details; and if he will make a statement. [85697]

Ms Jowell: The Government fund health and medical research in a number of ways.

The Department funds research and development to support its work on policy development and evaluation in health and social care. The Department also manages the National Health Service research and development levy which is used to support research and development of relevance to the National Health Service in hospitals, general practice and other health care settings, and to fund the NHS research and development programme. In addition, the Medical Research Council (MRC)—which receives most of its income via grant-in-aid from the office of my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry—funds medical research as part of the Government's funding of the science and engineering base.

The research commissioned involves many different research organisations. The precise list would change as research is commissioned and ceases but most medical schools and many universities, NHS providers and other research organisations are likely to be involved.

Details of projects directly funded by the Department or supported through the NHS R&D levy can be found on the National Research Register (NRR). This is available in the Library on CD Rom, and on the Internet: http://www.doh.gov.uk/nrr.htm. The NRR also contains many details of projects/trials funded by the MRC and other funders. The Department spent approximately £489 million on health and social care research in 1998–99. Details about the MRC can be found in their Annual Report, copies of which are available in the Library.

SOCIAL SECURITY

Examining Medical Practitioners

Mr. Ian Stewart: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security how many examinations have been carried out by examining medical practitioners in the Greater Manchester area since January 1998; how many complaints have been made about *(a)* the examinations and *(b)* the examining medical practitioners; and what were the nature of the complaints. [85488]

Angela Eagle: The information is not available in the format requested. The information that is available is included in the following table.

Number of examining medical practitioner's (EMP) examinations and complaints in Manchester—September 1998–April 1999

Month	*Number of EMP exams*	*Number of complaints*	*Doctor's manner*	*Content and length of examination, clinical findings*
September 1998	1,391	0	0	0
October 1998	1,129	1	0	1
November 1998	2,172	7	2	7
December 1998	1,994	7	4	7
January 1999	1,993	11	7	11
February 1999	1,962	11	1	9
March 1999	2,191	25	11	53
April 1999	1,813	18	11	15
Total	14,645	80	36	103

Notes:
1. Figures are provisional and subject to change
2. Some complaints will have been made on more than one issue

Source:
Medical Services

Child Benefit

Mr. Paul Marsden: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security how many children living in Shrewsbury and Atcham fall into the eldest child category for purposes of calculating the number who qualify for child benefit. [85655]

Angela Eagle: The administration of Child Benefit is a matter for the Chief Executive of the Benefits Agency, Peter Mathison. I have asked him to write to my hon. Friend.

Letter from Peter Mathison to Mr. Paul Marsden, dated 8 June 1999:

The Secretary of State for Social Security has asked me to reply to your recent Parliamentary Question asking how many children living in Shrewsbury and Atcham fall into the eldest child category for purposes of calculating the number who qualify for child benefit.

The information requested is not readily available, by region, to identify the number of children who qualify for the higher rate of Child Benefit payable for the eldest child. These figures could only be obtained at disproportionate cost. However, data will soon become available which it is hoped will enable the production of such figures, by Parliamentary constituency.

I am sorry I am not able to help at the moment.

Housing Benefit (Tower Hamlets)

Ms Oona King: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security when he expects to receive the Benefit Fraud Inspectorate's report on housing benefit administration in Tower Hamlets. [86187]

Mr. Timms: The Benefit Fraud Inspectorate (BFI) report on Housing Benefit and Council Tax Benefit administration in Tower Hamlets will be submitted to my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State before Parliament rises for the summer recess.

Social Security Appeal Tribunals

Mr. Etherington: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security (1) what plans he has to evaluate the impact on claimants' decisions of the change in the composition of social security appeal tribunals; [86154]

(2) what representations he has received about the change in the composition of social security appeal tribunals; and if he will make a statement. [86155]

Angela Eagle: Schedule 6 of the Social Security Act 1998 provides powers for the President of the Independent Tribunal Service to vary the composition of certain Social Security Appeal Tribunals. These changes are in advance of the implementation of the main provisions of the Act which remove the rigid requirement for all benefit and child support appeals to be heard by a three person tribunal.

Consultation and representations on the changes under Schedule 6 to the composition of Social Security Appeal Tribunals are matters which fall to His Honour, the President of the Independent Tribunal Service. The President also gave commitments to monitor these changes. The President's early monitoring of the changes provides no evidence to suggest that the percentage of appeals upheld has been affected by the introduction of flexible composition.

Benefit Assessment Appeals

Mr. Cox: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security how many appeals were made during the last 12 months against benefit assessments. [86192]

Angela Eagle: 334,988 of the appeals lodged with the Independent Tribunal Service (ITS) during the 12 months ending on 28 February 1999 were about benefit assessments.

Source:

100 per cent. download of the ITS computer system. The figure reflects the total number of new appeals to Social Security Appeal Tribunals, Disability Appeal Tribunals and Medical Appeal Tribunals.

Bereavement Benefits Scheme

Dr. Stoate: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security if the amount of national insurance contributions paid by the late spouse will affect the level of the allowance that widows and widowers can receive under the proposed Bereavement Benefits Scheme. [86619]

Mr. Timms: As with the current Widow's Benefit, entitlement to the proposed Bereavement benefits will depend on satisfaction of the contribution conditions by the late spouse. Reduced amounts can be paid if the conditions are not fully met and failure to meet the conditions can mean no benefits are paid. The contributions of married women who die before reaching pension age will count for the first time under our proposals and in the first year some 30,000 widowers will be able to claim benefit of £45 to £50 a week.

Stakeholder Pensions

Dr. Stoate: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security when the next stage of formal consultation on the detail of stakeholder pensions policy will commence. [86620]

Mr. Timms: The consultation paper "Stakeholder Pensions: Minimum Standards—the Government Proposals" was published on 2 June 1999. Copies have been placed in the Library and in the Vote Office. Further consultation papers will be issued in the coming weeks.

Asylum Seekers

Dr. Stoate: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security if he will provide the latest available figures on the total cost to the Social Security budget of claims by asylum seekers in the years 1993–94 to 1998–99. [86618]

Angela Eagle: The available estimated costs for Income Support (and Jobseeker's Allowance (income based) from 1997), Housing Benefit and Council Tax Benefit are in the table. Information on the other non-contributory benefits is not available.

Asylum seekers—estimated annual expenditure

£ million

Year	Total estimated annual expenditure	Income Support and Jobseeker's Allowance (IB)	Housing Benefit	Council Tax Benefit
1993–94	340	160	175	5
1994–95	360	180	175	5
1995–96	420	205	205	10
1996–97	400	195	195	10
1997–98	305	150	145	10
1998–99[1]	280	150	120	10

[1] Forecast expenditure figures

Notes:

1. Estimated annual expenditure figures are rounded to the nearest £5 million. Figures may not sum due to rounding.

2. Income Support/Jobseeker's Allowance estimates will include a number of non-asylum seekers that receive Urgent Case Payments for other reasons.

3. Annual expenditure figures for Income Support/Jobseeker's Allowance have been based on an average of four quarters for the relevant financial year, using number of cases and average weekly amounts.

4. Income Support for the unemployed was replaced by Jobseeker's Allowance in October 1996. Unemployed recipients of Income Support are therefore included in the Income Support estimates for 1995–96 and 1996–97. The 1997–98 figures include Jobseeker's Allowance (income based) recipients (only available for 1997–98).

5. Housing Benefit and Council Tax Benefit estimates have been calculated using the Housing Benefit Management 1 per cent. sample and Departmental Reports, and exclude asylum seekers receiving Housing Benefit who are not receiving Income Support. Numbers of recipients with Housing Benefit but no Income Support are thought to be negligible.

Source:

1. Income Support Statistics Quarterly Inquiries, May 1993 to February 1998.

2. Jobseeker's Allowance Statistics Quarterly Enquiries, May 1997 to February 1998.

3. Housing Benefit Management Information System, annual 1 per cent. sample of claimants in receipt of Income Support, at the end of May in each year given.

4. Departmental Report.

CULTURE, MEDIA AND SPORT

RADA

Mr. Peter Ainsworth: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport what plans he has to ensure the financial stability of RADA; and if he will make a statement. [86080]

Mr. Mudie: I have been asked to reply.

The Royal Academy of Dramatic Art is a private institution not funded directly by Government.

The Arts Council of England has awarded £23.75 million of Lottery funds towards RADA's centenary project, which is intended to enable the Academy to achieve financial independence to continue as a key provider of drama training.

TRADE AND INDUSTRY

Ilisu Dam

Mr. Brake: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry if he will list the steps which he has taken to give more detailed consideration to the areas of concern highlighted in the study of the Ilisu Dam project commissioned by the Swiss Government. [84893]

Mr. Wilson: ECGD is consulting other Government Departments and independent environmental advisers. They are also discussing the case with the other Export Credit agencies that are involved. No decision has yet been taken as to whether ECGD should support the project.

Research Council (Brussels)

Mr. Rammell: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what was the outcome of the Research Council held in Brussels on 20 May; and if he will make a statement. [85358]

Mr. Battle: The Research Council of 20 May:

1. Agreed decisions on the association of applicant countries (CCEE and Cyprus) with the Fifth Framework programme for European Research and Technological Development.

2. Adopted a resolution on "Women and Science: Mobilising women to enrich European research".

3. Received information from the Commission on the competitiveness of European enterprises in the face of globalisation and on its views on the decommissioning of the Joint Research Centre's obsolete nuclear facilities, and from the Presidency on scientific and technical co-operation with the Mediterranean partner countries.

After the formal council meeting, the Presidency held informal discussions, in which Ministers were joined by invited experts, on issues concerning future European research policy.

Climate Change Levy

Mr. Boswell: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what evaluation he has carried out on the impacts of a climate change levy, rebated by a general reduction in national insurance contributions, on the *(a)* steel, *(b)* chemical, *(c)* aluminium, *(d)* cement and *(e)* other major energy-using industries. [86043]

Mr. Battle: My Department is having extensive discussions with business on the impact of the climate change levy, and the accompanying reduction in employer National Insurance Contributions (NICs), which were announced by my right hon. Friend the Chancellor of the Exchequer in his 9 March Budget.

The Government have said that they wish to implement the climate change levy in a way which minimises any adverse impact on the competitiveness of UK business. I welcome the recognition of the special circumstances of intensive energy sectors and the planned negotiated agreements with them, which will enable them to get significantly lower rates of the levy in return for commitments to improve their energy efficiency or reduce emissions.

My right hon. Friend the Chancellor of the Exchequer will decide the final rates of the levy, including the discounts for intensive energy users which enter

negotiated agreements. The overall impact of the levy, coupled with the reduction in employer NICs, on these sectors will depend on these decisions. The Government will continue to listen to the views of business and as raised in response to the Customs and Excise consultation, which ended on 28 May and final decisions will be taken in the light of these.

Charities (Telephone Charges)

Mr. Sheerman: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what steps he is taking to discourage charities from using premium telephone line charges. [86217]

Mr. Wills: The Independent Committee for the Supervision of Standards of Telephone Information Services (ICSTIS) has responsibility for regulating premium rate services. ICSTIS enforces an effective Code of Practice which has provisions to ensure that consumers are given adequate information to enable them to take informed decisions about the use of premium rate services. The Code ensures that the costs of calls to premium rate charitable promotions must be given in advertisements and ensures the caller is aware of the name of the beneficiary. I am confident in the effectiveness of ICSTIS to regulate the premium rate services market for charitable promotions.

Biotechnology Applications

Mr. Alan Simpson: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry how many people are currently employed in the medical and pharmaceutical applications of biotechnology in the United Kingdom; and what has been the annual financial contribution of this area of biotechnology to the United Kingdom's GDP since and including 1992 *(a)* in actual terms and *(b)* in terms of a percentage of the whole. [86069]

Mr. Battle: This information is not available from official statistics. To obtain it, would involve disproportionate cost.

MOX Transport Plan

Mr. Llew Smith: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry if he will place in the Library a copy of the United Kingdom maritime threat assessment prepared as part of the MOX transport plan. [85821]

Mr. Battle: No. For obvious security reasons, the details of assessments by the security authorities, including maritime threat assessments, are confidential.

Plutonium Sea Shipments

Mr. Llew Smith: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry on what date the details of the United Kingdom safety and security plans covering the sea shipment to Japan from Sellafield of plutonium-based MOX fuel was communicated to the Japanese Government and Japanese nuclear authorities; and what response he received. [85826]

Mr. Battle: Under the terms of the 1988 US-Japan Nuclear Co-operation Agreement, it is the responsibility of the Government of Japan to prepare and to submit to the United States Administration a transport plan covering arrangements for the sea shipment of Mixed Oxide (MOX) fuel from Europe to Japan. This transport plan was prepared in close consultation with the Governments of France and the United Kingdom and submitted to the United States Government in January 1999. In May 1999, the United States Government confirmed that the transport plan fully satisfied the provisions of Annex 5 of the US-Japan Agreement.

Bilateral Development Aid

Mr. Streeter: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what discussions he has had with the CBI and other trade associations regarding untying UK bilateral development aid. [85964]

Mr. Wilson *[holding answer 8 June 1999]:* My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry has had no discussions with the CBI or other Trade Associations regarding untying UK bilateral aid.

Coal Authority (Records)

Mr. Todd: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry if he will make a statement on progress on the identification, distribution and preservation of *(a)* coal and *(b)* non-coal records which have been the responsibility of the Coal Authority. [85901]

Mr. Battle: The Coal Authority owns a range of records related to coal-mining and the coal resource that are relevant to its activities; in particular, the records of the Coal Commission, which consist of the Coal Holdings Register compiled following the Coal Act 1937 and 26,500 associated claim files; and over one million geological records (principally borehole logs) and 20,000 magnetic tapes of seismic data. It also maintains, and provides public access to circa 100,000 coal-mine abandonment plans owned by the Health and Safety Executive, together with 2,500 boxes of ancillary records (notebooks and calculation ledgers used by surveyors to produce the original plans). The Authority does not hold, other than on an incidental basis, non-coal records.

The Authority is currently considering in co-operation with other interested parties and those requiring access to the information where these records should be housed in the future. It is the Authority's intention to retain the records of the Coal Commission. The geological records and seismic data are in the process of being transferred to the British Geological Survey (BGS) centre at Keyworth, Nottinghamshire, to create a coherent collection of such records for all minerals. The Authority will shortly go to consultation on where the originals of the HSE's coal-mine abandonment plans, which are currently kept at the Bretby site, should be housed. It is the Authority's intention to retain micro-film copies of the plans if they are transferred to another record-holder.

Nuclear Power Stations

Dr. Gibson: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what discussions he has had with the nuclear industry on its plans for new stations. [85710]

Mr. Battle: My right hon. Friend and I have had a number of meetings with businesses in the nuclear industry, and many of these have included general discussion of the long-term prospects for new nuclear power stations, but we have received no applications for

consent to build a new nuclear power station, and to the best of my knowledge at present no company has plans to make such an application.

Wave Power

Mr. Hancock: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what research into wave power is currently being funded by the Government. [85955]

Mr. Battle *[holding answer 8 June 1999]:* The EPSRC announced its new £3.5 to £4 million per year Renewable and New Energy Technologies Programme in March 1999. The programme's remit covers renewable supply technologies, including marine (wave and tidal current) power and the first call for proposals closed on 14 May 1999. 131 outline proposals have been received, of which 15 are for wave energy projects. The outline proposals will be considered by an advisory panel later this month, following which full proposals for the most promising projects will be evaluated through EPSRC's peer review process.

In addition, on 30 March this year I announced the launch of a new wave power research programme as part of my Department's New and Renewable Energy Programme. I expect that programme to monitor the development of projects contracted under the third Scottish Renewables Order and to support research, development and demonstration projects which can contribute to the development and assessment of wave power. Since my announcement officials at DTI have received several outline proposals from researchers and will consider these further in the light of decisions taken on outline proposals already submitted to the EPSRC programme.

Animal-based Foodstuffs

Mr. Mitchell: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what elements of the World Trade Agreement prohibit *(a)* the United Kingdom and *(b)* the European Union from placing restrictions on the import of animal-based foodstuffs liable to contain high levels of antibiotic substances; which officials (i) negotiated, (ii) agreed to and (iii) endorsed on behalf of the negotiating parties those elements; and what ratification procedure was followed in (1) the European Union and (2) the member states. [86231]

Mr. Wilson: UK and EU regulation in this area is governed by the WTO Agreement on Application of Sanitary and Phytosanitary Measures. This Agreement recognises the right of members to take measures necessary for the protection of human, animal or plant health. It requires, however, that any trade measures are based on scientific principles and are not maintained without sufficient scientific evidence. In a case where insufficient scientific evidence is currently available, WTO Members are allowed to impose a temporary ban while a thorough risk assessment is carried out. This agreement formed part of the WTO Agreement which concluded the Uruguay Round of multilateral trade negotiations on 15 December 1993. The WTO Agreement was negotiated by the European Commission in consultation with EC member states under the provisions of the EC Treaties. The Agreement was signed on behalf of the United Kingdom by the former right hon. Member for Hove, the then Minister for Industry, in Marrakesh on 15 April 1994. Under the Ponsonby rule, the Agreement was laid before Parliament in May 1994 and debated on 14 June 1994.

The United Kingdom's instrument of Ratification to the WTO Agreement was deposited with the GATT Legal Adviser on 30 December 1994. For the EC, the WTO Agreement was accepted by means of a Council decision and assent given by the European Parliament. The Agreement entered into force on 1 January 1995. The main WTO Agreement was published as Treaty Series No. 57 of 1996 (Cm 3277), and the Agreement on Application of Sanitary and Phytosanitary Measures as No. 54 of 1996 (Cm 3275). The UK's certified copy of the WTO Agreement resides in the Public Record Office.

Trading (Human Rights)

Ann Clwyd: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what advice his Department gives to prospective exporters about the human rights record of the receiving country; and whether this advice is given only in response to a specific request. [85830]

Mr. Wilson: British Trade International, the joint DTI/FCO operation for international trade promotion, provides advice in response to specific requests, except in the case of Burma where it is provided routinely.

Funeral Industry

Mr. Gordon Marsden: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry (1) what assessment he has made of the results of the OFT inquiry into the funeral industry; [86280]

(2) what plans he has to review the regulations governing the funeral industry; [86281]

(3) what representations he has received from the OFT about competition in the funeral industry. [86282]

Dr. Howells: The Director-General for Fair Trading (DGFT) announced on 15 May 1998 an inquiry into the "at need" funerals industry. The inquiry is focusing on whether competition in the industry is effective.

I understand that the OFT has yet to complete its inquiries. On doing so, it will then be a matter for the DGFT to consider if further action is appropriate, such as making representations to the DTI.

There are no plans at present to regulate the funeral industry with the exception of the pre-paid funeral plans sector. It is proposed to bring this part of the industry within the scope of the Financial Services and Markets Bill.

HM Treasury issued a consultation paper in January 1999 outlining their proposals. Closing date for responses was 30 April. These responses are currently being considered by officials from DTI and the Treasury.

Corporate Neglect

Mr. Cohen: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what plans he has to implement the recommendations of the Law Commission's report on Corporate Neglect; and if he will make a statement. [85481]

Mr. Boateng: I have been asked to reply.

An inter-departmental working group of officials, which includes a member of the Law Commission, is currently considering the recommendations made in the Law Commission's report Number 237, "Legislating the Criminal Code: Involuntary Manslaughter", which includes the creation of a new offence of corporate killing.

We will consider whether and how to implement the recommendations of the Law Commission in respect of corporate killing once we have received the recommendations of the inter-departmental working group later this year.

PRIME MINISTER

European Defence Review

Dr. Godman: To ask the Prime Minister when he last met the leaders of NATO member states to discuss matters relating to a European Defence Review. [85195]

The Prime Minister: The last collective meeting was the NATO Summit in April where the main focus was the conflict in Kosovo. However, the Summit unanimously welcomed and endorsed the European defence initiative we launched last year.

I refer my hon. Friend to the statement I made to the House on 8 June 1999, *Official Report*, columns 463–65, where I set out details of agreement reached at the Cologne European Council on the further development of a common European security and defence policy.

Official Engagements

Sir Peter Tapsell: To ask the Prime Minister if he will list his official engagements for Wednesday 9 June. [85905]

The Prime Minister: This morning I had meetings with ministerial colleagues and others. In addition to my duties in the House, I will have further such meetings later today.

AGRICULTURE, FISHERIES AND FOOD

Bat Meat

Mr. Baker: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what estimate he has made of the extent of the illegal trade in bat meat within the UK; and what steps he is taking to eradicate it. [85742]

Mr. Rooker *[holding answer 8 June 1999]:* I am aware of the recent press reports stating that illegally imported bat meat is being sold in this country. MAFF officials, Official Veterinary Surgeons at Border Inspection Posts and local authorities have been asked to increase their vigilance in order to prevent this trade.

Horticulture Industry

Mr. Paice: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what assessment he has made of the applicability of the EU fruit and vegetable regime to the UK horticulture industry; and what proposals he has to improve the UK take-up of assistance under the regime. [86107]

Mr. Rooker: The reformed EU fruit and vegetable regime offers enormous benefits for UK growers. The progressive reduction in aid for intervention, and diversion of funds to structured operational programmes, has already enabled those growers who trade through producer organisations (POs) to benefit. Payments to POs for constructive works over a period of years enables POs to improve production techniques, quality, preparation for market, marketing and promotional activity, in addition to encouraging the use of environmentally sound practices.

Seventy six operational programmes are currently running in the UK. Funding for work on UK programmes in 1997 totalled £5.7 million. Payment for work in 1998 is expected to be about £7 million with a potential payment of £12 million for 1999. This represents new funding for the UK horticulture industry.

There is no great tradition of grower co-operation in the UK and, although a total of 92 POs in the UK are recognised under the new regime, the percentage of the UK fruit and vegetable sector covered by recognised POs is only 35 per cent. My officials have contacted organisations which have not sought recognition and encouraged them to do so. Independent growers are also encouraged to join existing POs or to form new organisations and seek recognition, so that they can benefit from EU aid.

International Whaling Commission

Mr. McNulty: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what was the outcome of the recent meeting of the International Whaling Commission. [86331]

Mr. Morley: The International Whaling Commission's 51st Annual Meeting was held in Grenada from 24 to 28 May. I attended the meeting, together with officials from the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food, the Foreign and Commonwealth Office, the Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions, the Turks and Caicos Islands and the British Virgin Islands, as well as representatives of environmental organisations.

At the meeting I re-affirmed the United Kingdom's opposition to whaling. I am pleased to say that efforts by Japan to secure a quota of 50 minke whales, despite the moratorium on commercial whaling, and to weaken the Southern Ocean Sanctuary were defeated by substantial majorities. There was once again strong criticism of Norway's and Japan's continued whaling activities.

The Chairman of the IWC, the Commissioner for Ireland, announced that discussions with IWC members on the ideas put forward by Ireland in 1997 were continuing, although he had no real progress to report. The Irish proposals would involve a ban on all whaling, including scientific whaling, outside coastal waters, with the possibility that countries might authorise whaling under IWC rules within their own coastal waters for domestic consumption. The proposals also envisage a ban on international trade in whale products.

In the ensuing debate I made it clear that the UK's ultimate aim remained a permanent, worldwide moratorium on all whaling other than aboriginal subsistence whaling. However, we recognised that this was not something that was likely to be achieved overnight, or that could be imposed on members of the IWC against their will. We were, therefore, prepared to

consider ideas for reaching interim solutions on the way to our ultimate destination. But any arrangements of this kind would have to deliver very real benefits to whale conservation. In this context, we continued to have reservations about some aspects of the Irish proposals, in particular the possibility of renewed coastal whaling. I noted that it seemed, in any case, unlikely that the Irish proposals represented a realistic way forward, given the opposition by Japan to ending scientific whaling. In these circumstances it was important to consider other ways in which the IWC could move forward. In the UK's view these included:

the creation of new regional sanctuaries;

changing the emphasis of the IWC's scientific committee away from the management of whale stocks in the context of whaling towards a much broader exploration of whale conservation issues;

continuing the IWC's efforts to assess fully the impact of environment change for cetaceans;

greater involvement of the IWC in issues relating to small cetaceans;

encouraging whalewatching as a benign, potentially very profitable and sustainable way of exploiting a natural resource;

continued involvement of the IWC in welfare issues, including the encouragement of more efficient and humane killing methods, particularly in aboriginal subsistence whaling.

I also reaffirmed that in the UK's view the IWC has an essential role to play as the only international body with worldwide responsibility for the conservation of whales and that we would continue to participate actively, and constructively, in its deliberations.

Australia and New Zealand reported that consultations were continuing on the idea of a South Pacific Sanctuary, but that they were not yet in a position to put forward a formal proposal; the IWC is likely to revert to this topic next year.

The meeting confirmed the central role that environmental concerns now play in the IWC's work. An impressive presentation by the US Commissioner demonstrated the scale of the potential threat posed to cetaceans by climate change and pollution. I emphasised that, in the light of our increasing understanding of these threats there was greater concern than in the past about the ability of whale populations to withstand direct exploitation; in our view this was a cogent reason to adopt a precautionary approach to cetacean conservation and management. The IWC agreed to provide core funding, including £100,000 drawn from its reserves, for two substantial programmes of research on the effects of climate change and pollution on cetaceans; it also urged other interested parties to contribute to these programmes.

The IWC agreed a further 3-year aboriginal subsistence quota permitting inhabitants of St. Vincent and the Grenadines to take two hump back whales a year. During the meeting the IWC considered whether recent takes under this quota contravened IWC rules, which prohibit the killing of whale calves: it was not possible to reach a firm conclusion on this matter, as the rules in question are not entirely clear. However, the agreement to extend the quota amended the rules to remove any uncertainty, and the IWC also agreed a definition of the term calf for the purposes of this quota. In agreeing the quota the IWC also noted commitments by the Government of St. Vincent and the Grenadines to ensure that this hunt is properly regulated, to review and improve hunting and killing methods and to provide a more detailed statement of its aboriginal subsistence needs when seeking any further quota. As amended it is now absolutely clear that the taking of a cow and calf is forbidden.

The IWC meeting was preceded by a workshop of scientific and veterinary experts which examined methods used to kill whales with a view to improving their humaneness. The UK delegation to the workshop was led by Professor Sir Colin Spedding, a previous chairman of the Farm Animal Welfare Council and an internationally recognised authority on welfare issues. The workshop produced an 11 point action plan to improve the effectiveness and humaneness of whale killing methods, including those used in aboriginal subsistence hunts. This was endorsed by the Commission in a resolution, which went on to encourage member governments to continue to submit relevant information to the IWC and to future workshops and to take steps, including the provision of appropriate technical assistance, to improve the humaneness of aboriginal subsistence whaling.

The Dall's porpoise hunt off the coast of Japan is the largest directed take of small cetaceans in the world. Recent information suggests that the level of catch may not be sustainable and the IWC adopted a resolution, put forward by the UK, expressing concern about the sustainability of the hunt, directing the IWC's Scientific Committee to carry out a full review of the affected stocks in 2001 and, in the meantime, inviting the government of Japan to reconsider the quota it sets for Dall's porpoises.

A number of other issues were considered. There was a discussion on whalewatching, in which I emphasised the economic benefits of this activity, particularly in the Caribbean, and drew attention to the Guidelines of Whalewatching in the UK issued by the Government. A resolution was adopted drawing attention to the risk posed to consumers of whalemeat (including meat from small cetaceans) by the high levels of contaminants found in some samples, and requesting the IWC's Scientific Committee to monitor contaminant burdens in cetaceans and, where necessary, pass the information on to the World Health Organisation and appropriate national authorities. Other resolutions were agreed requesting the Scientific Committee to develop DNA methods for monitoring the origin of whalemeat as part of a control scheme for any future whaling and drawing attention to the continued threat posed to small populations of highly endangered whales by ship strikes, by-catches, and in a limited number of cases, whaling.

Overall, this was a successful meeting for the UK. We achieved all our main objectives, and made progress towards our ultimate goals. My presence at the meeting underlined the importance that the Government attach to their policy of opposing whaling and to the role of the IWC.

FOREIGN AND COMMONWEALTH AFFAIRS

Political and Human Rights

Mr. Cox: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what funding has been given by his Department to develop political and human rights parliamentary discussion groups in Commonwealth countries in each of the last three years. [84746]

Mr. Tony Lloyd: A number of FCO budget lines are used to support the development of pluralist democratic institutions and multi-party political systems. However, as a result of the devolved nature of some of these programmes the information requested is not readily available and could be provided only at disproportionate cost.

While part of the FCO's grant-in-aid to the Westminster Foundation for Democracy has been used by WFD to fund various cross-party projects, these are generally to facilitate training. WFD do not fund round-table discussion groups or attendance at conferences.

Diplomatic Immunity

Mr. Dismore: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs which foreign embassies and high commissions have refused to waive diplomatic immunity when requested to do so, in each of the last three years. [85369]

Mr. Tony Lloyd *[holding answer 25 May 1999]:* None, in 1996, 1997, 1998. However, there has been one such case in 1999, on which further action is being pursued. It would, therefore, not be appropriate at this stage to identify the Mission concerned.

Mr. Dismore: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs how many foreign embassies and high commissions have waived diplomatic immunity in respect of offences committed by their staff or their staff's families in each of the last three years. [85368]

Mr. Tony Lloyd *[holding answer 25 May 1999]:* The number of times on which a state has waived the immunity of a diplomatic agent in the last three calender years is as follows:

1996—One

1997—One

1998—None

1999—One (as of 8 June).

Mr. Dismore: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs how many diplomats have been withdrawn by foreign countries from the United Kingdom at the request of the Government as a consequence of alleged crimes committed in the United Kingdom in each of the last three years. [85370]

Mr. Tony Lloyd *[holding answer 25 May 1999]:* In accordance with the guidelines laid out in the 1985 White Paper—The recommendations of the Government Report on Review of the Vienna Convention on Diplomatic Relations and Reply to "The Abuse of Diplomatic Immunities and Privileges"—the following were formally asked to leave the United Kingdom in the last three calendar years:

1996—Five diplomats and families; One dependant of an accredited diplomat

1997—One diplomat and family

1998—Two dependants of accredited diplomats

1999—None (as of 8 June).

Cyprus (Drug Offences)

Mr. Cox: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs how many British nationals have been charged with drug offences while staying in Cyprus in each of the last three years. [85516]

Mr. Hoon: The number of British nationals charged with drugs offences while visiting, (but not resident) in Cyprus and reported to our Consular service, was 19 in 1996, 17 in 1997 and 33 in 1998.

Sierra Leone

Mr. Mackinlay: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will make a statement on the current situation in Sierra Leone. [85551]

Mr. Tony Lloyd: We welcome the recent signing of a ceasefire agreement. We hope that the current negotiations in Lomé between the Government of Sierra Leone and the rebels will lead to a sustainable peace. We support President Kabbah's commitment to dialogue, and look to all rebel factions to commit themselves to the peace process, and end the violence and atrocities that have beset the people of Sierra Leone for so long.

Cyprus

Mr. Dismore: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs (1) what action he is taking within the EU to put pressure on Turkey to comply with the judgment in the Loizidou case; [85626]

(2) what action he is taking to persuade Turkey to comply with the judgment in the Loizidou case. [R] [85627]

Ms Quin: We and our EU partners continue to make clear to Turkey the need to respect the Court's judgment in this case, including in the Council of Europe's Committee of Ministers' Deputies. At its last meeting on 27 May the Committee of Ministers' Deputies agreed that its Chair would write to Turkey asking for clarification of Turkey's intentions. We will continue to discuss with EU partners, as with other members of the Council of Europe, how best to achieve Turkish implementation of the Court's judgment.

Indonesia

Mr. Hancock: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what representations he has made to the Indonesian Government, and what representations he has received, concerning the massacre of unarmed civilians on 3 May near the city of Lhokseumawe. [85954]

Mr. Hoon: We are deeply disturbed by the incident in Lhokseumawe on 3 May in which a number of unarmed civilians, including women and children, were killed or injured. The late Derek Fatchett expressed our concern in a statement on 7 May which looked to the Indonesian Government to conduct a thorough investigation into the incident, to bring to account those responsible and to take all possible steps to ensure that local armed forces act with restraint and in accordance with basic human rights.

Mr. Laurence Robertson: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what representations he has made to the Government of Indonesia on measures to protect the Christian and

Chinese minorities in that country from violence in the period before the general election; and if he will make a statement. [85649]

Mr. Hoon: We have consistently made clear to the Indonesian Government that the international community closely monitors the treatment of all minority groups in Indonesia, including Christians and the ethnic-Chinese community.

British Council (Manchester)

Mr. Brady: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs (1) when he intends to inform British Council staff based in Manchester of his detailed proposals for changes in the staffing and functions of the Manchester office; [86108]

(2) what proposals he has to change *(a)* the number of British Council staff in Manchester and *(b)* the functions of the British Council which are currently based in Manchester. [86109]

Mr. Hoon: Issues concerning staff, their duties and location are matters for the British Council. I understand that there are no proposals to change staffing and functions based in Manchester. The British Council is committed to its Manchester location until 2002 when there is an option to continue the leases on its current accommodation. The British Council is reviewing the options on premises and staffing in the light of its overall strategy and funding. Staff and their representatives will continue to be informed and consulted.

Libya

Mr. Drew: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what plans he has, following the suspension of UN sanctions, to lift the national controls on the export of aircraft, aircraft parts and flight simulators to Libya; and if he will make a statement. [86612]

Mr. Tony Lloyd: The Government have decided to lift the controls on the export of aircraft, aircraft parts and flight simulators to Libya under the provisions of Dual-Use and Related Goods (Export Control) Regulations 1996, as amended. Legislation will be laid before the House shortly. This decision follows the suspension on 5 April of UN sanctions, which included a prohibition on the supply of any aircraft or aircraft components to Libya.

The Foreign Office will issue a press release later today. The "Summary of Government Commitments regarding the Application of Strategic Export Controls" will be amended and updated versions placed in the Libraries of the House and on the FCO Website. The Department of Trade and Industry will issue a Notice to Exporters before the amending legislation takes effect.

Iran

Mr. Drew: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what the Government's policy is on the export of arms to Iran. [86615]

Mr. Tony Lloyd: There has been no change to current policy, as set out in the answer I gave to my hon. Friend the Member for Rugby and Kenilworth (Mr. King) on 28 January 1998, *Official Report*, columns *273–74*.

Further to the answer I gave to my hon. Friend the Member for Erewash (Liz Blackman) on 25 March 1999, *Official Report*, column *343*, my Department and the Ministry of Defence have approved the issue of a licence by the Department of Trade and Industry, as an exception to our embargo on Iran, for the export of 1,020 bullet proof vests to the United Nations Drug Control Programme to equip Iranian frontier personnel. The bullet proof vests will enhance the capacity of Iran's frontier personnel to combat drug trafficking and reduce the sad toll of casualties which they have borne in the past 20 years.

Yugoslavia (Fuel Embargo)

Mr. Gareth R. Thomas: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what legislative steps have been taken to provide for a visit and search regime in respect of ships suspected of carrying fuel to the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia in breach of the EU-led embargo; and if he will make a statement. [86614]

Mr. Tony Lloyd: The North Atlantic Council agreed a visit and search regime for ships suspected of carrying fuel to the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia on 25 May. The regime is based on the consent of participating states.

To enable the United Kingdom to participate fully in this regime legislation allowing Royal Navy vessels to visit and search British ships outside UK waters came into force on 3 June.

The necessary enforcement powers in respect of United Kingdom ships are contained in the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia (Supply, Sale and Export of Petroleum and Petroleum Products) (No.2) Regulations 1999 which revoke the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia (Supply, Sale and Export of Petroleum and Petroleum Products) Regulations 1999.

The Dependent Territories (Federal Republic of Yugoslavia) (Supply, Sale and Export of Petroleum and Petroleum Products) Order 1999 imposes, by way of the prerogative, an oil embargo against the FRY in the Overseas Territories except for Bermuda and Gibraltar, with similar enforcement powers, in respect of ships registered in the territories concerned, to those in the Regulations. The UK does not have powers under the prerogative to legislate for Bermuda, which has been asked to legislate in similar terms. The EC Regulation is directly applicable in Gibraltar which will be legislating locally.

The EC Regulation is not directly applicable to the Crown Dependencies. The Channel Islands have already legislated locally and the Isle of Man will do so shortly.

UN Register of Conventional Arms

Mr. Drew: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs when the United Kingdom will submit its 1999 return to the UN Register of Conventional Arms; and whether copies of the return will be placed in the Library. [86616]

Mr. Hoon: We submitted our 1999 return to the UN Register covering conventional arms transfers in calendar year 1998 on 27 May. Copies have been placed in the Libraries of the House.

Diplomatic Parking Fines

Mr. Gareth R. Thomas: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will publish figures recording the number of outstanding parking and other minor traffic violation fines incurred by diplomatic missions and international organisations in London during 1998. [86613]

Mr. Tony Lloyd: At the end of 1998 there were 4,259 unpaid fines in respect of parking and other minor traffic violations incurred by members of Diplomatic Missions and International Organisations in London.

In April this year the Foreign and Commonwealth Office wrote to all Diplomatic Missions and International Organisations in London offering them an opportunity to either pay their outstanding fines or appeal against them if they considered that they had been incorrectly issued. As a result payments totalling £66,200.00 were received and a number of fines were cancelled, leaving a total of 2,667 unpaid fines for 1998. The following table details Diplomatic Missions and International Organisations which have more than 10 fines outstanding.

Unpaid parking and minor traffic violation fines—1998—diplomatic vehicles

Position	*Diplomatic mission/international organisation*	*Number of fines outstanding*
1	Ghana	153
2	Nigeria	130
3	Turkey	117
4	Oman	105
5	Angola	102
6	United Arab Emirates	101
7	Egypt	87
8	Jordan	84
9	Morocco	82
10	Cyprus	75
11	Greece	73
12	Cuba	68
13	Sudan	67
14	Russia	59
15	Zimbabwe	58
16	Jamaica	55
17	Hungary	50
18	Algeria	47
18	Iran	47
18	Poland	47
21	Liberia	45
22	Georgia	44
23	Mongolia	37
24	Japan	36
25	Thailand	34
26	USA	33
27	Cameroon	32
27	Ethiopia	32
27	Uganda	32
30	Bangladesh	28
31	Afghanistan	26
31	India	26
33	France	25
34	Pakistan	24
34	Ukraine	24
36	Yemen	23
37	Brazil	21
37	Lithuania	21
37	Uzbekistan	21
40	Belarus	20
41	Bulgaria	19
41	Tunisia	19
43	Albania	18
43	Malaysia	18
45	Barbados	15
45	China	15
45	Philippines	15
45	International Maritime Organisation	15
49	Qatar	14
50	Kyrgyzstan	13
50	Zambia	13
52	Gabon	12
52	Kenya	12
52	Malawi	12
52	Peru	12
56	Canada	11
56	Eastern Caribbean States	11
		2,435

WALES

Regional Air Service

9. **Mr. Öpik:** To ask the Secretary of State for Wales what progress he has made in respect of supporting the establishment of a regional air service in Wales. [85163]

Mr. Hain: Our current study to improve air services for Wales will be taken forward by the National Assembly for Wales in collaboration with the Deputy Prime Minister.

Structural Funding

10. **Mr. Livsey:** To ask the Secretary of State for Wales what discussions he has held recently with Treasury and Department of Trade and Industry Ministers to secure matched funding for objectives 1 and 2 structural funding for east Wales. [85164]

Mr. Michael: This Government's success in securing such a significant level of funding for Wales under the new EC Structural Funds programmes has been discussed at ministerial level. I am sure the hon. Member will want to congratulate the Prime Minister and the Chancellor and Welsh Labour Members of the European Parliament who worked so hard to secure this important opportunity for Wales.

Cabinet Decisions

11. **Mr. Baker:** To ask the Secretary of State for Wales what mechanisms exist for informing the National Assembly of *(a)* decisions in and *(b)* representations from Cabinet meetings in respect of matters relating to Wales. [85165]

Mr. Michael: Concordats between the Assembly and the UK Government will cover the provision of information to the Assembly, including the passing on of Cabinet decisions. Under the Government of Wales Act 1998, it is the duty of the Secretary of State for Wales to consult the Assembly on the Government's legislative programme. There will also be regular contact at a ministerial level between the Assembly and other Government Departments as there will be between officials.

School Transport

12. **Mr. Edwards:** To ask the Secretary of State for Wales if he will make a statement about the provision of home to school transport. [85166]

Mr. Hain: The provision of home to school transport is a matter for local education authorities. Each LEA must publish a home to school transport policy which sets out arrangements for its area. The School Transport Advisory Group (STAG) has been commissioned to provide advice on school transport. A sub group of STAG is looking specifically at home to school transport arrangements. The Group has been asked to report its findings by the end of the year.

Junior Ministers

14. **Mr. Nicholas Winterton:** To ask the Secretary of State for Wales if he will make a statement on the number of junior Ministers he expects to serve in his Department after 1 July. [85168]

Mr. Michael: That is a matter for my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister.

Secretary of State

15. **Mr. Syms:** To ask the Secretary of State for Wales how he plans to divide his time between his responsibilities as Secretary of State and his functions within the National Assembly. [85169]

Mr. Michael: Whether as Secretary of State for Wales or as First Secretary, my priority will be to serve the people of Wales and to deliver a stronger economy, an improved health service, jobs and opportunity for our young people and better education and training systems in Wales. By occupying both roles during the crucial transition period I will be able to ensure a smooth transfer of powers which keeps these priorities clearly in focus at the Welsh Office and the Assembly.

17. **Mr. Jack:** To ask the Secretary of State for Wales what payments he has received from public funds as Secretary of State for Wales. [85171]

Mr. Michael: Between October 1998, when I was appointed as Secretary of State for Wales, and the end of May 1999, I have been paid £27,299 from public funds in respect of that office.

Children's Heart Surgery

16. **Ms Julie Morgan:** To ask the Secretary of State for Wales what plans he has to restart children's heart surgery in Wales. [85170]

Mr. Jon Owen Jones: The Specialised Health Services Commission for Wales is currently preparing a report on the options for the future provision of paediatric cardiac surgery and paediatric cardiology services in Wales. This will shortly be considered by its Board and will take into account the importance of maintaining services at the University Hospital of Wales and Llandough Hospital NHS Trust. These options will then be the subject of wide discussion within the NHS and with other interested parties.

In the meantime, children needing cardiac surgery will continue to be referred to those centres that can most appropriately treat their particular condition.

Following the transfer of functions, this will be a matter for the National Assembly.

Kosovo Refugees

18. **Ann Clwyd:** To ask the Secretary of State for Wales what steps the Welsh Office is taking to co-ordinate the reception of refugees from Kosovo. [85172]

Mr. Michael: My officials have been liaising closely with colleagues at the Home Office who are in the lead on this issue on arrangements which would need to be put in place should we receive refugees from Kosovo in Wales. They are also providing information to all agencies in Wales who have an interest in this matter. My Department is also considering what resources would be required to co-ordinate these arrangements although the Home Office has advised that there are no immediate plans for refugees to come to Wales.

The role currently undertaken by my Department will be taken over by the National Assembly for Wales with effect from 1 July.

Ministerial Responsibilities

19. **Mr. St. Aubyn:** To ask the Secretary of State for Wales if he will make a statement on the responsibilities of Ministers in his Department following the transfer of powers to the National Assembly for Wales. [85174]

Mr. Michael: Ministers in the Office of the Secretary of State for Wales will have the following functions after the transfer of functions to the Assembly on 1 July:

Functions relating to their membership of the UK Government.

Responsibility to ensure that the interests of Wales are fully considered in the workings of the UK Government.

Responsibility to steer primary legislation relating to Wales through Parliament.

Functions relating to the fact that this House will vote the Main Estimate to the Secretary of State for Wales, who will make a grant to the Assembly after deducting the cost of running his own office.

Responsibility to consult the Assembly on the Government's legislative programme.

Responsibility to ensure that the arrangements for co-operation between the Assembly and the UK Government are working effectively.

Mr. Tredinnick: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales what assessment he has made of the impact that his newly acquired responsibilities in the National Assembly will have upon the discharge of his functions as Secretary of State. [85173]

Mr. Michael: The advent of the National Assembly for Wales will strengthen the United Kingdom and improve the way that services are delivered to the people of Wales. I shall be able to achieve substantial improvement in the effectiveness of my role of Secretary of State as a result of close co-operation with Members of the Assembly and others.

EU Funding

20. **Mr. Simon Hughes:** To ask the Secretary of State for Wales what plans the Government have for increasing funding from the European Union to Wales for investment in infrastructure and the public services. [85175]

Mr. Hain: Under the relevant EU Regulations, West Wales and the Valleys qualify for Objective 1 funding. We are currently consulting on possible Objective 2 areas. Infrastructure measures could be eligible for funding in both Objective 1 and Objective 2 areas.

Farm Incomes

21. **Mr. Prior:** To ask the Secretary of State for Wales what recent representations he has received regarding the levels of farm incomes in Wales. [85176]

Mr. Jon Owen Jones: The latest estimates of incomes for full-time farmers in Wales were published in February 1999. The figures show the cash income for dairy and livestock farms in Wales is forecast to fall by 21 per cent. in 1998–99, to £17,900.

Rural Livestock Markets

22. **Mr. Gray:** To ask the Secretary of State for Wales what recent representations he has received with regard to the future of rural livestock markets. [85177]

Mr. Jon Owen Jones: We have received no recent representations with regard to the future of rural livestock markets.

The Lamb and Beef Action Plan, prepared by the industry-led working groups which my right hon. Friend launched together with the group chairmen on 8 March, encourages livestock markets in Wales to re-appraise their position and plan for the future. It is important for the competitive health of the Welsh livestock industry that a strategic network of livestock marketing centres should remain.

Following the transfer of functions, this will be a matter for the National Assembly.

Job Creation

23. **Mr. Barry Jones:** To ask the Secretary of State for Wales how many new jobs have been created in the most recent year for which figures are available; and if he will make a statement. [85178]

Mr. Hain: The unadjusted number of employee jobs in Wales increased by 11,100 (1.1 per cent.) between December 1997 and December 1998. It now stands at just over 1 million.

Following the transfer of functions, this issue will be a matter for the National Assembly.

Draft Concordat

24. **Mr. Llwyd:** To ask the Secretary of State for Wales when he expects the concordat between the Foreign and Commonwealth Office and the Welsh Office governing the relationship between Government departments and the National Assembly of Wales to be published. [85179]

Mr. Michael: All concordats will be agreed between the National Assembly for Wales and the UK Government. They will be published as soon as agreement has been secured.

Objective 1 Funding

25. **Mr. Ieuan Wyn Jones:** To ask the Secretary of State for Wales what procedures will be employed to evaluate project proposals for objective 1 funding in the months before the Government have made a decision on match funding. [85180]

Mr. Hain: No decisions have yet been taken about implementation procedures for Structural Fund programmes under the new Regulations for 2000–06. This will be a matter for the National Assembly.

Assembly Costs

26. **Mr. Wilkinson:** To ask the Secretary of State for Wales what is his current estimate of *(a)* the capital cost and *(b)* the running cost of the Welsh National Assembly in its first year of operation. [85181]

Mr. Michael: The capital cost of providing temporary and permanent accommodation for the National Assembly for Wales is estimated at £17 million to £20 million, although this estimate must be regarded as provisional until the final design for the new building is agreed.

We are continuing to plan within the overall estimate of £15 million to £20 million for the annual additional running costs of the Assembly which was contained with the explanatory and financial memorandum to the Government of Wales Bill and which will be balanced by savings in the budgets of Welsh quangos; our latest detailed estimate for 1999–2000 is £19.2 million.

Following the transfer of functions on 1 July, this issue will be a matter for the National Assembly.

New Deal

27. **Mr. Rowlands:** To ask the Secretary of State for Wales if he will make a statement on the employment effect of the new deal in Wales to date. [85182]

Mr. Hain: I have been very pleased with the progress of the New Deal in Wales. The latest information shows that over 8,600 New Deal participants have obtained jobs through one or other of the New Deal initiatives.

Within this total, the New Deal for 18–24s has seen over 6,500 jobs secured by young people, including over 4,800 sustained jobs lasting at least 13 weeks.

The impact on youth unemployment has been there for all to see, with a massive 44 per cent. drop in the number of 18–24-year-olds claiming JSA for 6 months or more in Wales between April 1998 and April 1999.

NHS Specialist Regional Services

28. **Mr. Win Griffiths:** To ask the Secretary of State for Wales what funding he has made available for the current year for specialist regional services in the national health service. [85183]

Mr. Jon Owen Jones: The funding of specialised health services is a matter for health authorities and the Specialised Health Services Commission for Wales.

Welsh health authorities will receive more than £2 billion for 1999–2000, some £1.5 billion of which will be included within their discretionary allocations, an increase of 10.3 per cent. over 1998–99.

A further £120 million is included with allocations for protected and ring fenced services. Included within this is:

£9.2 million which is the final year of ring-fenced funding for the Morriston cardiac centre

£12.6 million for the Artificial Limb and Appliance Service

£6.7 million for High Security Psychiatric Services

£1.9 million for Paediatric Intensive Care services.

Following the transfer of functions, this will be a matter for the National Assembly.

Milk Industry

29. **Mr. Dafis:** To ask the Secretary of State for Wales what action he is taking to safeguard the position of the Welsh milk industry. [85184]

Mr. Michael: With the National Assembly Secretary for Agriculture and Rural Affairs, Christine Gwyther I met farming leaders on Monday 24 May. The Action Plan for the Dairy industry in Wales, published in March 1999, sets out a positive agenda through which the Welsh Development Agency and the National Assembly will be able to work with the industry to help it adapt and invest in the dairy processing facilities which are essential for future prosperity in the sector.

Following the transfer of functions, this issue will be a matter for the National Assembly.

Livestock Farming

Dr. Julian Lewis: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales what representations he has received since 1 May 1997 from the Vegetarian Society on livestock farming in Wales. [85167]

Mr. Michael: None.

Written Answers to Questions

Thursday 10 June 1999

NORTHERN IRELAND

Seamus Ludlow

Mr. McNamara: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland what assistance the RUC has offered the Irish police following the announcement of a new inquiry into the killing of Seamus Ludlow in 1976; and if she will waive restrictions preventing witnesses and others assisting the investigation. [86140]

Mr. Ingram *[holding answer 9 June 1999]:* On the basis of inquiries to the Irish Government, I have been advised that there has been no such announcement.

TRADE AND INDUSTRY

Greenhouse Gas Emissions

Mrs. Brinton: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry if he will make it his policy to change departmental refrigeration and air-conditioning systems to operate on not-in-kind refrigerants. [86166]

Dr. Howells: The policy of this Department is to ensure that no products containing CFCs, HFCs, Halon Carbon tetrachloride 1,1,1, methyl bromide or any other ozone depleting substances are purchased.

The Department continues to look at alternative methods of refrigeration wherever practical.

Passenger Service Charge

Mr. Gordon Marsden: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what representations he has received about the decision of airline companies to separate passenger service charges from the price of their tickets; and what assessment he has made of that decision. [86237]

Dr. Howells: I have received one letter on this issue. My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions has lead responsibility for this issue, and I would refer my hon. Friend to the reply given by my hon. Friend the Minister for Transport in London to my hon. Friend the Member for West Bromwich, East (Mr. Snape) on 11 May 1999, *Official Report*, columns *108–09*.

Hearing Aid Council Act 1968

Mr. Oaten: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what plans he has to amend the Hearing Aid Council Act 1968 to permit a more streamlined disciplinary procedure for hearing aid dispensers; and what plans he has to consult on the effectiveness of the powers of the Hearing Aid Council. [85938]

Dr. Howells: I am aware of the Hearing Aid Council's concerns about the Hearing Aid Council Act 1968. There continues to be considerable pressures on the legislative programme and I can give no guarantee when time might become available, but will be looking for an opportunity.

Arms Exports (Indonesia)

Ann Clwyd: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry if he will list the individual items of military equipment licensed for export to Indonesia and their uses which are referred to in the Annual report on Strategic Export Controls as *(a)* communications equipment, *(b)* electrical components, *(c)* electronic equipment and *(d)* military simulator. [85831]

Dr. Howells: The information requested relates to 10 Standard Individual Export Licences, and inquiries are being made under the Code of Practice on Access to Government Information. As confidential information is involved, the parties concerned are being asked if they consent to its disclosure, and this can take some time. I will write to my hon. Friend as soon as possible, and will place a copy of that letter in the Library of the House.

Export Licences

Mr. Hancock: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry how many Open Individual Export Licences were *(a)* applied for, *(b)* approved and *(c)* refused during 1998. [86242]

Dr. Howells: Detailed information about export licensing decisions made in 1998, including those made on applications for Open Individual Export Licences, will be included in the 1998 Annual Report on Strategic Export Controls, which will be published in due course.

Oesophageal Cancer

Mr. Kidney: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry, pursuant to the answer of 26 April 1999, *Official Report*, column *29*, on oesophageal cancer, what representations he has received that patients' consents were not obtained prior to their admission to the trial procedures. [85717]

Mr. Battle: I have not received any representation on this issue.

Special Advisers

Mr. Matthew Taylor: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry, pursuant to his answer of 17 May 1999, *Official Report*, columns *252–53*, on Special Advisers, if he will list the meetings which his Special Advisers held with members and officials of the United States Government between 10 and 16 October 1998, listing the dates and locations of each meeting and the names of the US Ministers and officials at each meeting. [86283]

Mr. Byers: No such meetings were held.

Combined Heat and Power Generation, Cleveland

Miss Melanie Johnson: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry when he will announce his decision on Enron Europe Ltd.'s notification to build a combined heat and power generation station at the Teesside Gas Processing Plant, Seal Sands, Cleveland. [86826]

Mr. Battle: I have today granted clearance under Section 14 of the Energy Act 1976 in response to Enron Europe Ltd.'s notification to build a 45 MW gas-fired combined heat and power station at the Teesside Gas Processing Plant at Seal Sands, Cleveland. The decision has been taken in accordance with the policy set out in the White Paper entitled "Conclusions of the Review of Energy Sources for Power Generation and Government response to fourth and fifth Reports of the Trade and Industry Committee" (Cm 4071).

I believe very strongly that CHP should play a vital and expanding role in the future of the UK power market. The technology has now come into its own, and the efficiency it offers is delivering benefits not just to business users, but to the country as a whole.

Copies of the Press Notice and Section 14 clearance are being placed in the Library of the House.

Departmental Recruitment

Miss Melanie Johnson: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry if he will publish summary information on his Department's recruitment for calendar year 1998, and the use of permitted exceptions to the principles of fair and open competition and selection on merit, as required by the Civil Service Commissioners' Recruitment Code. [86825]

Dr. Howells: It is DTI policy that recruitment is carried out on the basis of fair and open competition and selection on merit, subject to the exceptions permitted by the Civil Service Commissioners. My Department has systems in place which ensure that the principles of fair and open competition are understood and followed, in accordance with the provisions of the Civil Service Commissioners' Recruitment Code. These systems are subject to internal check and to external check by the Commissioner's approved auditors.

The DTI's Executive Agencies and the Government Office network make separate arrangements for publishing recruitment data and the following table and narratives describe only Headquarters recruitment.

Recruitment information
Number of staff recruited 1 January 1998 to 31 December 1998

							Gender		Ethnic background [2]			
Range	*Permanent*	*FTA*	*Recurring temp*	*Standby*	*Short notice*	*Other* [1]	*M*	*F*	*White*	*Ethnic minority*	*Not stated*	*Disability*
Range 11	—	3	—	—	—	—	3	—	[2]	[2]	[2]	[2]
Range 10	6	15	—	1	—	—	17	5	19	3	0	2
Range 9	12	—	—	—	—	—	9	3	11	1	0	0
Range 8	18	—	—	—	—	—	13	5	17	1	0	2
Range 7	12	—	—	—	—	—	11	1	9	1	2	2
Range 6	16	—	—	—	—	1	4	13	16	0	1	4
Range 5	8	—	1	—	—	9	8	10	14	2	2	1
Range 4	19	3	—	—	—	7	11	18	17	9	3	2
Range 3	9	—	2	—	—	25	24	12	24	8	4	3
Range 2	25	—	—	—	—	17	15	27	20	17	5	0
Range 1	11	2	—	—	—	5	7	11	15	1	2	3
Fast stream	20	—	—	—	—	7	15	12	22	4	1	1
Total	156	23	3	1	—	71	137	117	184	47	20	20

[1] Includes numbers of casuals, sandwich course students, legal trainees
[2] Note that ethnic data has been suppressed for those ranges where numbers recruited are 5 or less to avoid the possibility of identifying individuals

The number of occasions on which the permitted exceptions to fair and open competition and selection on merit have been used at each level (except for appointments of up to 12 months) are categorised as below. Details of the exceptions are underneath the relevant category.

extensions of appointments of up to 12 months up to a maximum of 24 months: none

recurrent short-term appointments:

2 Range 3s, 1 Range 5, 1 part-time Range 11 and 6 Range 10s, all employed in the Queens Award office where the work is seasonal

short-term appointments where highly specialised skills are required:

1 Range 10 on a standby contract for 20 days providing advice on clean coal generation technology and 2 fixed-term appointments of Range 10 Lawyers to meet unforeseen shortfalls in specific areas of legal services

extensions of short-term appointments beyond the initially publicised period, including conversions to permanency:

1 Range 10 Research Officer whose appointment was extended to oversee the completion of a project; 1 Range 10 converted to permanency due to difficulty of recruiting a Remuneration Specialist

secondments: 56

extensions to secondments:

26, mostly in the export promotion field where it is difficult to attract the right people. Also, it is becoming increasingly difficult to gain agreement for secondees' release from their parent organisation

re-appointment of former civil servants:

1 Range 10 Lawyer formerly employed by the Crown Prosecution Service; 1 Range 4 who was originally recruited by DSS, applied to DTI for a casual post and was then reinstated in situ

transfers of staff with their work (not under TUPE): none

transfers of staff from other public services without work (unless from a public body staffed exclusively by civil servants): none

appointments of surplus acceptable candidates to shortage posts: none

appointments of disabled candidates under modified selection arrangements: none

any use of the exceptions reserved for the Commissioners (ie appointments on the basis of the proven distinction of the individual and appointments not in order of merit): none.

CULTURE, MEDIA AND SPORT

Millennium Celebrations (Promotion)

Mr. Peter Ainsworth: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport what steps his Department took to promote Britain's millennium celebrations at the European Incentive and Business Travel and Meetings Exhibition in Geneva. [85297]

Janet Anderson *[holding answer 24 May 1999]:* As the name indicates, this particular Exhibition in Geneva was primarily concerned with business incentives and business travel. The British Tourist Authority, which is funded by my Department, was present at the exhibition and promoted the millennium celebrations primarily through their "VisitBritain" internet site which was live on the stand with open access for anyone wishing to explore it. In addition, pictures of the Millennium Dome and other millennium projects, such as the Eden Project, were integrated into the overall design of the stand.

Ministerial Hospitality

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport if he authorised the Minister for Tourism, Film and Broadcasting to accept night club tickets and hospitality arranged by Sony Entertainment and the British Phonographic Industry Ltd.; and what account he took of the Ministerial Code in doing so. [86655]

Janet Anderson: There is no requirement for Ministers to seek the advice of their Secretary of State on the acceptance of gifts or hospitality. The DCMS has a clear policy on hospitality, in line with the Ministerial Code, and all Ministers and officials are expected to abide by it.

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport what the total monetary value was of the *(a)* night club tickets arranged for the Minister for Tourism, Film and Broadcasting by Sony Entertainment and the British Phonographic Industry Ltd. and *(b)* hospitality received. [86656]

Janet Anderson: There is no charge for entry for guests of members of the Met Bar, Brown's or the Mayfair Club, and, therefore, no monetary value attached to the entry obtained. No other hospitality was received.

LORD CHANCELLOR'S DEPARTMENT

Jurors

Jane Griffiths: To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department what exemptions from jury service are available to jurors with unavoidable child care responsibilities. [86198]

Mr. Vaz: If someone applies for excusal from jury service on the grounds of the need to care for young children, the guidance to court staff states that their application should be dealt with sympathetically. Each application is considered by the jury-summoning officer, based on the information provided by the applicant.

FOREIGN AND COMMONWEALTH AFFAIRS

MOX Shipment (Japan)

Mr. Llew Smith: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs, pursuant to his oral answer to the hon. Member for Carshalton and Wallington (Mr. Brake), of 18 May 1999, *Official Report*, column 861, on MOX shipments to Japan, by what means the plutonium in MOX fuel is destroyed in nuclear reactors; and if he will list the evidence on which he based his reply. [85825]

Mr. Hoon: Typically, MOX fuel contains between 50 and 70 kilograms of plutonium for each tonne of fuel entering the reactor. It is estimated that after four years of generating electricity, the amount of plutonium remaining in the fuel would have been reduced by about 18 kilograms in each tonne. This underpins the view that the use of MOX fuel reduces proliferation risks by gradually reducing plutonium stockpiles.

This is supported by an OECD (Nuclear Energy Agency) study ("Management of Separated Plutonium: The Technical Options", OECD, Paris 1997) which has indicated that if MOX fuel is burnt at reasonable levels, the world's stockpile of plutonium can be held steady and then gradually reduced during the first decade of the next century.

Entry Clearance Applications

Fiona Mactaggart: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs how long, on average, it took between refusal of settlement entry clearance at *(a)* New Delhi, *(b)* Bombay, *(c)* Islamabad, *(d)* Karachi, *(e)* Lagos, *(f)* Accra and *(g)* Moscow and the dispatch of the explanatory statement to the UK for statements dispatched in (i) September 1998, (ii) December 1998 and (iii) March 1999; and if he will estimate how long it will take for explanatory statements to be dispatched for refusals made in (A) December 1998, (B) March 1999, (C) April 1999 and (D) May 1999. [86101]

Mr. Hoon: Information in the form requested is not held centrally and could be provided only at disproportionate cost.

Explanatory statements are not prepared until a Notice of Appeal against the entry clearance decision is received. The time limit for this is three months from the date of refusal. In 1998, 81 per cent. of settlement refusals worldwide resulted in an appeal.

In 1990 guidelines were introduced requiring Entry Clearance Officers to produce and submit explanatory statements to the appropriate authorities in the UK within three months of receipt of the notice of appeal.

The following table shows the percentage of explanatory statements submitted within three months at the posts named, during 1998:

	Percentage
New Delhi	85
Bombay	98
Islamabad	74
Karachi	91
Lagos	92
Accra	50
Moscow	100

Kashmir

Mr. Pike: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what recent discussions he has had with the Pakistan and Indian Governments about Kashmir; and if he will make a statement. [86063]

Mr. Hoon: We are deeply concerned by infiltration of militants into Jammu and Kashmir, and fighting between them and the Indian Security Forces. My right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary recently discussed the situation in Kashmir with his Pakistani and Indian counterparts. We continue to urge both countries to work together to resolve the issues between them, including Kashmir, through bilateral dialogue.

Mr. Pike: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what representations he has received following recent hostilities on the line of control in Kashmir. [86062]

Mr. Hoon: We are aware of the concern of many people in the UK regarding the current situation in Kashmir. We have made clear to Indian and Pakistani governments our hope that they can work together to resolve the issues between them, including Kashmir, through bilateral dialogue.

Angola

Mr. Pike: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what recent discussions he has had with representatives of the Angolan Government regarding *(a)* the activities of UNITA in that country and *(b)* the international supply of arms to UNITA; and if he will make a statement. [86061]

Mr. Tony Lloyd: We are in regular contact with the Angolan authorities both in London and in Luanda. Indeed I most recently discussed these issues with Dr. Miranda, the Angolan Foreign Minister, on 23 February when I was in Luanda. We deeply regret the renewal of the conflict for which we hold Dr. Jonas Savimbis' UNITA responsible. We fully support the tightening of United Nations sanctions on the sale of diamonds, on oil supplies and arms for UNITA. We welcome the establishment by the United Nations Secretary-General of expert groups to study the issue. We look forward to learning the results of the visit to the region by Ambassador Fowler, the Chairman of the UN Angolan Sanctions Committee. We shall then discuss with the Angolan authorities, our EU partners and all those members of the international community interested in finding a peaceful solution to the conflict in Angola how best to implement his findings.

INTERNATIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Tobacco

Jackie Ballard: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development if she will make a statement on tobacco consumption in the developing world. [86213]

Clare Short: I view with great concern the estimate by the World Health Organisation (WHO) that, if current trends continue, tobacco will be the leading cause of disease burden in the world by 2030, causing about one in eight deaths, and that 70 per cent. of tobacco-related deaths will be in developing countries. I strongly support the priority being given to tobacco control by WHO through its "Tobacco Free" initiative, and the efforts to establish an international framework convention for tobacco control which, in particular, will aim to protect children and adolescents from exposure to tobacco products and their promotion. We are contributing £200,000 this financial year to the "Tobacco Free initiative".

DEFENCE

Turkey

Mr. Hancock: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what was the value of defence products exported to Turkey during 1998. [86204]

Mr. Spellar: Information on defence exports will be included in the Government's Annual Report on Strategic Export Controls for 1998, which will be published in due course.

Pay and Personnel Agency

Mr. Miller: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what key targets have been set for the Pay and Personnel Agency for the financial year 1999–2000. [86911]

Mr. Spellar: The Chief Executive of the Pay and Personnel Agency (PPA) is responsible for providing pay and personnel information services for the Ministry of Defence as defined in the agency framework document. During 1999–2000 the PPA will be set the following challenging key performance targets:

1. To make 100 per cent. of all payments to staff by the due date (excluding late payments caused by invalid claims or late notification outside the control of the Agency).
2. To keep error rates within the following limits:
   12 per 1,000 payments of weekly industrial pay
   6 per 1,000 payments of monthly non-industrial pay
   20 per 1,000 awards of pension
   15 per 1,000 payments of expenses
3. By 31 March 2000 to implement the action plan established from the customer satisfaction survey.
4. To meet the Department's requirement for implementing agreed pay and grading changes.
5. By 31 March 2000 to complete training of 60 per cent. of all staff in leadership or change management or customer service as appropriate.
6. To achieve Agency IIP accreditation before the end of 1999.
7. To achieve full Y2K compliance of critical systems with revised contingency plans for maintaining business continuity into the next millennium.

8. To deliver the financial and organisational objectives resulting from the PPA Efficiency Review and in doing so achieve at least a 15 per cent. reduction in operating costs compared with the 1998–99 cash allocation.

Military Survey Defence Agency

Mr. Miller: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what Key Targets have been set for the Military Survey Defence Agency for the financial year 1999–2000. [86912]

Mr. Spellar: The role of Military Survey is to ensure the provision of geographic support to defence operations, planning and training. The Key Targets for the Agency for the 12 months from April 1999 are:

Key Target 1:

To satisfy 100 per cent. of requirements for geographic support to current operations within the timescale agreed between the Agency and its customers.

Key Target 2:

To establish the baseline for measurement of customer satisfaction with the Agency's products and services.

Key Target 3:

To complete the agreed annual production programme on time and to cost.

Key Target 4:

To establish the baseline measurement of the effectiveness of the Agency's geographic information holdings in meeting customer requirements.

Key Target 5:

To maintain the requirement-readiness state of the required Field Support elements of the Agency as required by the Department.

Key Target 6:

To achieve a 3 per cent. improvement in efficiency.

RAF Personnel Management Agency

Mr. John Smith: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what key targets have been set for the RAF Personnel Management Agency for the financial year 1999–2000. [86913]

Mr. Doug Henderson: Key Targets have been set for the Chief Executive of the RAF Personnel Management Agency for the Financial Year 1999–2000 as follows:

Key Target 1—Peacetime Manning

To ensure that the percentage of trained personnel either filling posts or on alternative tasks for which there is an approved Manning and Training Margin is 92.5 per cent. or greater.

Key Target 2—War, Crisis and MOD Authorised Unestablished Tasks

To man War, Crisis and MOD authorised Unestablished Tasks at 98 per cent. or greater.

Key Target 3—Career Management

To ensure that 80 per cent. or more personnel who are given a posting that qualifies for a domestic move receive a minimum of 90 days notice.

Key Target 4—Manpower Planning

To ensure that the percentage variation between the actual trained strength and the authorised trained strength, taken as an average over the financial year is no greater than + or − 1 per cent.

Key Target 5—Efficiency

To maintain operating costs within a reduced cash allocation of 1.7 per cent. in real terms from the last financial year.

Joint Air Reconnaissance Intelligence Centre

Mr. McNulty: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what key targets have been set for the Joint Air Reconnaissance Intelligence Centre Defence Agency for the financial year 1999–2000. [86914]

Mr. Spellar: The role of the Joint Air Reconnaissance Intelligence Centre is to produce imagery intelligence and imagery products and services to meet MOD and operational command requirements. The Key Targets for the Agency for the 12 months from April 1999 are:

Key Target 1:

To satisfy 95 per cent. of operational requirements for imagery, imagery intelligence (IMINT) and imagery-derived products within the timescales specified in the Customer Agreement.

Key Target 2:

To provide detached service personnel for intelligence-related support to operations duties (up to a maximum of 6 per cent. of the service strength at any time).

Key Target 3:

To satisfy 85 per cent. of non-operational requirements for imagery, imagery intelligence (IMINT) and imagery-derived products and services within the timescales specified in the Customer Agreement.

Key Target 4:

To achieve a 3 per cent. improvement in efficiency.

Key Target 5:

To establish the baseline for measurement of customer satisfaction with the Agency's products and services.

Defence Intelligence and Security Centre

Mr. McNulty: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what key targets have been set for the Defence Intelligence and Security Centre Defence Agency for the financial year 1999–2000. [86915]

Mr. Spellar: The role of the Defence Intelligence and Security Centre is to train the armed forces and other Intelligence agencies in intelligence and security disciplines and conduct after capture; to maintain an operational capability; and to contribute to effective and timely advice to the armed forces on appropriate intelligence and security matters. The Key Targets for the Agency for the 12 months from April 1999 are:

Key Target 1:

To satisfy 100 per cent. of operational taskings required by the Department to the standard specified by the tasking authority.

Key Target 2:

To deliver the training programme endorsed by the Defence Intelligence Training Policy Group within agreed resources.

Key Target 3:

To achieve an overall 80 per cent. measure of customer satisfaction with the quality of training delivered.

Key Target 4:

To reduce the real-terms cost of delivering the average training place made available by the DISC by 2 per cent. in FY1999–2000.

Milestone Objective:

To achieve Investors in People accreditation by 31 December 1999.

Patents

Mr. Dalyell: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence how many patent applications have been passed to his

Department under section 22 of the Patents Act 1977 in each year since its implementation; how many are still held by his Department; and if he will make a statement on the procedures followed by his Department in respect of this matter. [85352]

Mr. Spellar: MOD records show that 4,700 Patent Applications were passed to MOD in the period 1985–98, of which 1,669 are still prohibited from publication. The total number of applications passed to MOD between 1978, when the Patents Act was implemented, and 1984 is not available, because the only information in the computer database relates to those applications which are still subject to prohibition; 471 applications from that period are still subject to a Section 22 prohibition order. Annual summaries of these figures follow: Of the overall total of 2,140 cases still prohibited from publication, 927 are overseas patent applications, which have been filed under secure conditions in the UK. These come from Australia, Belgium, Canada, Denmark, France, Germany, Italy, The Netherlands, New Zealand, Norway, Spain, Sweden and the United States of America, countries with which the UK has reciprocal arrangements for the protection of applications which have been prohibited from publication, and which have procedures similar to Section 22 of the 1977 Patents Act.

The MOD may not see any prohibited application until either the owner of the application has given permission for this, or until 18 months after the filing date, if such permission is not forthcoming. The MOD endeavours to confirm a prohibition order, or to recommend rescission of the order, within three months of receipt of the applications. 85 per cent. of new applications are dealt with within this time.

Each application which is prohibited from publication is reviewed annually by MOD to decide whether the prohibition order should be maintained or rescinded.

SCOTLAND

Warm Deal

Mr. Connarty: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland what progress has been made in implementing the Warm Deal programme in Scotland under the New Deal. [85407]

Mr. Macdonald: By 31 March 1999, 37,000 houses had been insulated under the Warm Deal by 450 New Deal employees.

From 1 July 1999, this will be a matter for the Scottish Parliament.

ENVIRONMENT, TRANSPORT AND THE REGIONS

Rural Bus Services

Mr. Baker: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if it is his policy that all underspend on the Rural Bus Services Grant for 1998–99 will be added to moneys available to improve rural bus services in 1999–2000. [85658]

Ms Glenda Jackson *[holding answer 8 June 1999]:* The 1998–99 underspend on the grant has been added to the sum available for allocation to local authority schemes successful in the rural bus challenge competition, as was reflected in the total amount of challenge awards announced on 16 December.

Genetically Modified Crops

Mr. Baker: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions in what ways the harvested material from the genetically modified crop test sites of *(a)* herbicide resitant oilseed rape, *(b)* high laurate modified oilseed rape, *(c)* herbicide resistant maize and *(d)* herbicide resistant beet will be disposed of. [85942]

Mr. Meacher *[holding answer 8 June 1999]:* The method by which harvested material from experimental releases of genetically modified crops is disposed of is specified in every consent, the details of each consent are available on the statutory public register held at my Department.

Typical means of disposal of harvested material include the methods set out as follows:

(a) Herbicide resistant oilseed rape seed is harvested and buried in landfill sites or incinerated, depending on quantities. The green plant material is treated with herbicide and then incorporated into the soil on site.

(b) High laurate modified oilseed rape seed is harvested and used for research or stored in bonded warehouses pending decision on future uses. Green plant material is treated with herbicide and then incorporated into the soil on site.

(c) Herbicide resistant maize is chopped and incorporated into the soil, incinerated or buried in landfill depending on quantities.

(d) Herbicide resistant beet is taken for analysis and then incinerated. Beets not required for analysis are chopped by farm machinery and incorporated into the soil on site.

Lead Shot

Mr. Boswell: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what representations he has received from the Countryside Alliance concerning his recent consultation paper on the use of lead shot over wetlands; and what reply he has sent. [86046]

Mr. Meacher *[holding answer 8 June 1999]:* My Department has received a number of representations on the proposed regulations on the use of lead shot including those of Countryside Alliance. Their views on the Regulations will be considered along with those of other organisations and individuals who have commented.

Mr. Burns: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions when he expects to lay before Parliament delegated legislation dealing with lead shot. [85917]

Mr. Meacher *[holding answer 8 June 1999]:* It is the intention of my Department to lay the Statutory Instrument on the use of lead shot before Parliament in time for regulations to come into force in England on

1 September 1999. From 1 July, any regulations to restrict the use of lead shot in Scotland and Wales will be a matter for the Scottish Parliament and Welsh Assembly respectively.

Atmospheric Pollution Trends

Mr. Dalyell: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will make a statement on trends in the levels of *(a)* ammonia, *(b)* benzene, *(c)* mercury and *(d)* phosgene in the atmosphere. [86026]

Mr. Meacher *[holding answer 8 June 1999]:* *(a) Ammonia*—My Department has been funding a nationwide network of around 70 sites to measure the ambient concentrations of ammonia since 1996. To date, there is not a sufficiently long dataset to discern authoritatively any trends, although early indications are that there is substantial seasonal and inter-annual variability. There are larger concentrations in spring and summer, and the largest concentrations are in warm, dry years. On the basis of natural variability, monitoring for more than five years will be necessary to clearly detect changes in response to changes in national emissions. Numbers of livestock and nitrogen fertiliser usage, which are the main sources of ammonia, have declined since the mid 1980s.

Earlier ad-hoc monitoring campaigns from this period are not sufficient to demonstrate increased concentrations in the 1980s compared with the present. Much longer term datasets of precipitation chemistry and deposition have shown that atmospheric ammonia increased substantially between 1950 and the 1980s, which can be explained by both increases in livestock numbers and nitrogen fertiliser inputs.

(b) Benzene—My Department has funded the continuous real-time measurement of benzene in the air since 1993. There are now 13 sites in the network, including roadside, urban background, and rural locations. In 1997, the running annual mean for benzene from this network ranged from (rural) 0.5–(urban centre) 2.1 parts per billion. To date, there is not a sufficiently long dataset to discern authoritatively any trends. Results of the monitoring are available in the Department's Digest of Environmental Statistics, and are available on the Department's internet site.

(c) Mercury—Mercury is predominantly present in the UK atmosphere as either particulate mercury or other semi-volatile mercury compounds. This leads to measurement problems in that it is difficult to measure the two phases in the same sample. My Department has been measuring mercury at three sites—Chilton in Oxfordshire, Styrrup in north Nottinghamshire and Wraymires in the Lake District. These are all relatively remote locations. Measurements have been taken of particulate mercury and of mercury in rain. Table 1 lists the atmospheric concentrations of mercury (ng m^{-3}) at rural locations. The particulate mercury is only a small fraction of the total, perhaps 4 per cent. Table 2 gives mercury concentrations in rain water (µg l^{-1}) at rural locations, mercury is rarely detectable in rain water. There is no trend to speak of in either of these measures of mercury concentrations, except that analytical detection limits have improved markedly in recent years.

Table 1: Atmospheric mercury concentrations (ng m^{-3}) at rural locations

Year	Chilton	Styrrup	Wraymires
1992	0.14	0.52	<0.1
1993	1.6	2.1	0.29
1994	0.11	0.32	0.18
1995	0.095	0.21	<0.1
1996	0.18	0.37	0.23
1997	0.07	<0.2	0.19
1998	0.22	0.72	0.49

Table 2: Mercury concentrations in rain water (µg l^{-1}) at rural locations

Year	Chilton	Styrrup	Wraymires
1992	<1	<6	<6
1993	<1	<1	<1
1994	0.026	0.031	0.019
1995	<0.1	0.2	<0.1
1996	<0.1	<0.1	<0.1
1997	<0.005	<0.008	0.009
1998	<0.006	<0.006	<0.006

(d) Phosgene—My Department has no information on the levels of phosgene in the atmosphere.

Air Safety

Mrs. Dunwoody: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions how many random ramp checks on foreign airlines have been undertaken by his Department in the last year; and in how many cases were problems found. [85844]

Mrs. Liddell *[holding answer 8 June 1999]:* The Department asks the CAA to carry out checks on foreign-registered aircraft using UK airports where evidence suggests that ICAO standards may not be met. There were 63 checks in the year from 1 April 1998 to 31 March 1999; of these, 28 revealed no problems or only minor differences from ICAO standards, such as, for example, a defective light bulb in the cabin. Six inspections revealed serious problems which required that the aircraft be detained until corrective action was taken. The remaining checks revealed less serious differences from ICAO standards, which were drawn to the attention of the operators and the relevant national aviation authorities.

Mrs. Dunwoody: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what plans Her Majesty's Government have for the future of the Safety Regulation Group following the reorganisation of the CAA. [85882]

Mrs. Liddell *[holding answer 8 June 1999]:* The future of the Safety Regulation Group of the Civil Aviation Authority will be considered in the light of responses to the consultations on a public/private partnership for National Air Traffic Services Ltd. and on the institutional arrangements for transport safety across all modes.

Mrs. Dunwoody: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what bilateral agreements the United Kingdom has established to govern the arrangements for checking the operating procedures of foreign aircraft flying into the United Kingdom. [85845]

Mrs. Liddell *[holding answer 8 June 1999]:* There are no bilateral agreements specifying procedures for checking the operating procedures of foreign aircraft flying into the United Kingdom.

The UK has agreed with partners in the European Civil Aviation Conference on a Safety Clause to be inserted, as the opportunity arises, into bilateral Air Service Agreements. In brief, the clause allows either party to call for discussions within 30 days when any safety problem arises and to inspect the other's aircraft at any time. To date, insertion of the safety clause has been agreed with 11 countries.

Multimodal Transport Study (London and South-West Corridor)

Jane Griffiths: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what targets, in respect of the encouragement of rail freight, the multimodal study of the London and South-West Corridor announced as part of the Trunk Roads Review will have. [86196]

Ms Glenda Jackson: A key objective of the London to South-West and South Wales multimodal study is to examine the scope for modal shift. This will include the potential for the transfer of more freight onto the railway. Until the study is undertaken, it is not possible to assess this potential or to consider what might be a realistic target.

EU Regional Chambers

Mr. Mitchell: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what status regional chambers currently have within the acquis of the European Union; what personnel are currently responsible for their administration; and what information is collated centrally concerning their membership functions and activities. [86230]

Mr. Caborn: Regional chambers have no formal status in relation to the European Union. However, they provide a mechanism through which regional partners can present a coherent regional view on European issues.

Regional chambers are voluntary partnerships, and personnel issues are matters for each chamber. However, I have placed details of the current chair and secretary of each chamber in the Library.

Regional chambers seeking designation under the Regional Development Agencies Act 1998 are required to provide the Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions with a copy of their constitution and a list of members.

Birmingham Northern Relief Road

Dr. Tony Wright: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will release all parts of the Concession Agreement for the Birmingham Northern Relief Road under the terms of the Environmental Information Regulations 1992 after the end of judicial proceedings. [85824]

Ms Glenda Jackson: Having regard to the outcome of the recent legal actions, my noble Friend the Under-Secretary is giving careful consideration to a request for disclosure of the Concession Agreement.

Litter

Mr. Coaker: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what assessment he has made of the power of *(a)* local authorities and *(b)* the police to prosecute people who drop litter in the street; and how many people have been prosecuted for dropping litter in the street under these powers in each of the last three years. [85672]

Mr. Meacher: The Advisory Group on Litter undertook a wide-ranging review of the litter legislation, including the powers of local authorities and the police, in 1993. A summary of the Advisory Group's report is available in the House Library.

The number of defendants prosecuted for litter offences under section 87 of the Environmental Protection Act 1990 in England and Wales is given in the following table[1]:

	1996	*1997*	*[2]1998*
Police Prosecution	455	377	377
Other Prosecution[3]	171	128	109

[1] Data for the Home Office Court Proceedings Database
[2] Provisional
[3] Includes prosecutions instigated by Government Departments, local authorities (the majority of which fall into this category), private organisations and individuals

Night Flights

Joan Ruddock: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he has reached conclusions following the second stage of the consultation on night restrictions at Heathrow, Gatwick and Stansted; and if he will make a statement. [86775]

Ms Glenda Jackson: On 17 November 1998 the Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions issued the second of two consultation papers on the next night restrictions regime for Heathrow, Gatwick and Stansted airports, to apply from 31 October 1999 until the end of the 2004 summer season. This second consultation paper took into account all relevant responses to the preliminary consultation paper issued on 27 February 1998.

The November consultation paper was in two parts. Part 1 was concerned with all aspects of the night restrictions regime now applying at the three airports. Part 2 examined options for changes to the preferential use of Heathrow's runways at night. The decisions I am announcing today are concerned with Part 1 of the November consultation paper only. Consideration of the responses to the options examined in Part 2 is continuing and a separate announcement will be made on that in due course. Decisions on Parts 1 and 2 of the consultation paper are not inter-dependent.

The current night restrictions are among the most stringent in Europe: night movements by Chapter 3 noise certificated aircraft are not limited at most other leading airports. We said in the preliminary consultation paper that we did not expect to propose major changes to the night restrictions for the next regime. To relax the restrictions significantly or to ban night flights entirely would not be consistent with the Government's objectives set out in the consultation paper.

We have decided to implement the proposals in the consultation paper, but with four modifications.

(a) The proposal to reduce the seasonal noise quotas for Heathrow from winter 1999–2000 onwards to nearer the level of current usage is to be implemented but with smaller reductions in the noise quotas than proposed. The winter season noise quota will be set at a level which is below quota usage in winter 1998–99.

(b) The proposal to reduce the seasonal noise quotas for Gatwick progressively from winter 2001–02 onwards is to be implemented but with larger reductions in the noise quotas than proposed.

(c) The proposal to reapportion the Gatwick movement limits pro rata to the length of the summer and winter seasons is not to be implemented and the current apportionment of the movements limits is to be retained for the next regime.

(d) The proposal to increase the noise quotas for Stansted, while maintaining the incentive for airlines to use quieter aircraft at night, is to be implemented but the reasons underpinning it differ to some degree from those set out in the consultation paper.

The overall effect of the decisions is to put in place a new night restrictions regime at the three airports which will contribute towards achievement of the Government's objectives set out in the consultation paper. The decision to reduce the noise quotas for Heathrow to nearer the level of current usage, and in the case of the winter season to a level below usage in winter 1998–99, will help safeguard the improvement in the noise climate during the noise quota period brought about since 1993 under the current regime. The decision to reduce the noise quotas for Gatwick by more than proposed in the consultation paper, in conjunction with the decisions we have reached on other aspects, is expected to bring about an improvement in the night noise climate around the airport over time. The decision not to reapportion the Gatwick movements limits pro rata to the length of the seasons will enable airlines to develop services in summer by more than would have been the case under the Government's proposal, but other environmental benefits will be provided through the larger than proposed reductions in the noise quotas. The decision to increase the noise quotas for Stansted by about 3.5 per cent. per annum will provide for the further development of the airport broadly as envisaged in 1993 and 1994.

The full decision and the reasons for the decision are dealt with in the document "Night Restrictions at Heathrow, Gatwick and Stansted: Revised restrictions with effect from 31 October 1999", copies of which have been placed in the House Library.

In reaching these decisions we have taken into account the disturbance caused by night flights and the need to ensure that local communities are not exposed to excessive levels of aircraft noise at night. Account has been taken of the existing noise climate around each airport, the local circumstances of each airport, and the distribution of population under their principal arrival and departure tracks. These have been weighed against the aviation interests involved, the existing air services using each airport and the wider economic considerations. We believe that the decisions announced today will protect local people from excessive levels of aircraft noise at night.

Copies of responses, except where the author has requested confidentiality, will be made available for inspection by prior appointment at the DETR Information Centre, Great Minster House, 76 Marsham Street, London, SW1P 4DR.

TREASURY

Aircraft Pollution

Mr. Brake: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what assessment he has made of proposals for *(a)* an aircraft emissions tax and *(b)* an aircraft fuel charge, (i) in revenue terms and (ii) in respect of their impact on pollution from aircraft. [85687]

Ms Hewitt: No such assessments have been made.

EU Directive (Taxation of Interest)

Mr. Denzil Davies: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if he will estimate the total amount of tax which would have been collected in the fiscal year 1998–99 by paying agents situated in the United Kingdom if the draft EU directive on the taxation of interest payments at the rate of 20 per cent. had been operational and if the UK had opted for the withholding regime. [85833]

Dawn Primarolo: It is not possible to estimate the revenue consequences of the situation described with any degree of certainty.

Working Families Tax Credit

Ms Harman: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer, pursuant to his answer of 10 May 1999, *Official Report*, column *58*, on Working Families Tax Credit, what will be the effect on their eligibility for Working Families Tax Credit of an employee taking unpaid parental leave under the Employment Relations Bill at a time which coincides with the assessment for their next award period. [85832]

Dawn Primarolo: In order to be eligible for Working Families Tax Credit, an employee will need to meet various criteria, which are the same as those for Family Credit, including working 16 hours or more a week at the time of the application or in the period immediately preceding or following the application. Where an employee is on unpaid parental leave, the application will be treated in the same way as any other period of unpaid leave.

Single Currency

Mr. Mitchell: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer by what means statistics relating to the flow of capital investment for all, or particular, purposes, from the United Kingdom into each of the other member states of the European Union, are collated following the introduction of the single currency; and what assessment he has made of the effect of the United Kingdom joining the single currency on the collation of such statistics. [86228]

Ms Hewitt: The information requested falls within the responsibility of the Director of the Office for National Statistics. I have asked him to reply.

Letter from Tim Holt to Mr. Austin Mitchell, dated 10 June 1999:

As Director of the Office for National Statistics (ONS), I have been asked to reply to your recent parliamentary question on statistics relating to the flow of capital investment.

Data sources for information on UK outward capital investment flows are outlined in *National Accounts Concepts, Sources and Methods* published in 1998 (in Chapters 24 and 25). The data are collected from regular enquiries by the ONS and the Bank of England. Inquiries of this type will continue should the UK join Monetary Union.

Geographical breakdowns, which include an analysis of flows between the UK and individual member states, are published for direct investment flows but such detailed information is not available for portfolio investment, other investment and reserve assets. Some data are also collected with an EU/Non EU split.

British Energy

Ms Lawrence: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if he will make a statement about the recent sale of the Government's holding of debt in British Energy. [86828]

Mr. Milburn: The sale of HM Treasury's three bonds in British Energy (£109,861,000 5.949 per cent. bond due 2003, £163,444,000 6.077 per cent. bond due 2006, £134,586,000 6.202 per cent. Bond due 2016) was completed on 4 June 1999. Payment will be made to HM Treasury on 11 June. Proceeds from the sale, net of commissions, will total £392 million.

HEALTH

Dental Charges

Mr. Paul Marsden: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will abolish all dental charges for pensioners; and if he will make a statement. [85706]

Mr. Denham: Entitlement to help with National Health Service dental charges is based on the principle that those who can afford to contribute should do so, while those most likely to have difficulty paying should be protected. Pensioners on low incomes are entitled to claim free NHS dental treatment or help with the cost of charges under the NHS Low Income Scheme.

NHS Bodies (Running Costs)

Miss Widdecombe: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what the estimated annual running costs are for the last financial year of *(a)* the Advisory Committee on Resource Allocation, *(b)* Local Education Consortia and *(c)* the Capital Priorities Advisory Group; and if he will make a statement. [86071]

Mr. Denham: For 1998–99, the estimated running costs for the Advisory Committee on Resource Allocation and the Capital Prioritisation Advisory Group are £22,000 and £5,000 respectively. These were funded from the Department's running costs (within Vote 2).

The Local Education Consortia costs are estimated at £5.8 million for 1998–99. These were funded from expenditure on hospital and community health services (within Vote 1).

Midwives (Grading)

Miss Widdecombe: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what plans he has to review the grading of midwives. [85721]

Mr. Denham: I refer the right hon. Member to the reply given by my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State to the hon. Member for Uxbridge (Mr. Randall) on 8 June 1999, *Official Report*, column 458.

CABINET OFFICE

Electronic Services

Mr. Coaker: To ask the Minister for the Cabinet Office when he intends to publish information on the target set by the Prime Minister to deliver 25 per cent. of Government services electronically. [86827]

Dr. Jack Cunningham: A report on progress by Departments and their key agencies is being published today. Copies of the report have been placed in the Libraries of the House and it will be published on the site www.citu.gov.uk. The report contains information supplied by Departments on a sample of key dealings between the citizen and business and government.

SOCIAL SECURITY

Benefit Payments (Barcodes)

Mr. Field: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security (1) if the barcode system to be installed in post offices will be able to record stolen order books; [85861]

(2) what benefits are planned to be paid through the barcode system to be used in post offices; [85877]

(3) what visible information on order books will be concealed by the barcode technology to be installed in post offices; [85858]

(4) if the barcode technology to be introduced on order books will require Post Office staff to ask a security question. [85860]

Angela Eagle: The barcode system to be installed in post offices will be able to record stolen order books. System-produced order books for the following benefits include a barcode and will therefore be controlled through the use of the Order Book Control System (OBCS) installed in post offices:

Attendance Allowance
Child Benefit
Disability Living Allowance
Disability Working Allowance
Earnings Top Up
Family Credit
Guardians Allowance
Incapacity Benefit
Income Support
Retirement Pension
War Pensions
Widows Benefit.

No visible information on order books in concealed by barcode technology. Order books continue to include a customer's name, address and National Insurance number. The purpose of the barcode is to hold information which uniquely identifies each order book.

There are no plans for Post Office staff to be required to ask a security question, and the information contained within the barcode would not support any such proposal.

Bereavement (Pension Costs)

Mr. O'Hara: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security if he will estimate the total cost to the Government of paying a SERPS widow's/widower's pension to any person bereaved after 6 April 2000 broken down into the following groups *(a)* based on 100 per cent. of the amount accrued for any contributions made between 6 April 1978 and the Royal Assent of the Social Security Act 1986, *(b)* based on 75 per cent. of the amount accrued for any contributions made between the Royal Assent of the Social Security Act 1986 and (i) 5 April 1996 and (ii) 5 April 1999 and *(c)* based on 50 per cent. of the amount accrued for any contributions made (1) since 6 April 1996 and (2) since 6 April 1999. [86048]

Mr. Timms: The information is in the table.

The additional costs of the two options specified compared to current legislation

£ million

Year	*(a), (b)*(i), *(c)*(1)	*(a), (b)*(ii), *(c)*(2)
2000	50	50
2010	950	950
2020	1,650	1,700
2030	1,850	1,900
2040	1,550	1,650
2050	950	1,000

Notes:

1. The figures are supplied by the Government Actuary's Department.

2. The figures are in 1999–2000 price terms and are rounded to the nearest £50 million. They represent gross costs excluding income-related benefit offsets.

3. The figures include SERPS paid to widows below State Pension age, but do not take account of the proposed bereavement benefit changes currently before Parliament.

4. Real earnings growth of 1.5 per cent. has been assumed.

National Minimum Wage

Mr. Rowlands: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security how many people employed in *(a)* his Department and *(b)* its associated public bodies have benefited from the introduction of the national minimum wage. [86023]

Angela Eagle: 4,397 staff in this Department, out of approximately 90,000 staff, have benefited from the introduction of the national minimum wage. This includes the Department's Agencies, and 139 staff in the associated public bodies.

EDUCATION AND EMPLOYMENT

Education Authorities (Private Firms)

16. **Sir Teddy Taylor:** To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what procedures he intends to use to review the progress made by private firms running education in place of local education authorities. [85418]

Mr. Blunkett: Contracts for organisations taking on the delivery of education services in poorly performing LEAs will contain a series of key performance indicators and core outcomes against which the contractor's performance will be judged. These performance measures will be linked to a payment mechanism which will ensure that payments to the contractor are based on delivering an improved service. The precise details of such contracts are, of course, a matter for negotiation with providers. The LEA and the contractor will also need to hold regular contract monitoring meetings to review progress against the Service Management Plan.

In addition, Ofsted will continue its programme of local education authority inspections. These will include inspecting and reporting upon any education services being delivered by a contractor.

Teaching Staff (Salaries)

17. **Mr. David Heath:** To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what is the average annual salary for teaching staff in local education authority schools in *(a)* the south-west region and *(b)* England. [85421]

Ms Estelle Morris: The estimated average salary of full-time teaching staff, including heads and deputies, in the local education authority maintained nursery/primary, secondary and special sector received during 1998–99 was £24,100 in England and £24,000 in the south-west region.

Average salaries at local education authority level are likely to vary for a number of reasons including: the grade structures required by the mix of school sizes, teacher's average length of service and payment of recruitment and retention points. The estimate takes account of the staged pay award in 1998–99, 2 per cent. in April with the full 3.8 per cent. paid in December.

Technology Colleges

18. **Mr. Gordon Prentice:** To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what advice and guidance he has issued to schools seeking technology college status. [85424]

Mr. Blunkett: A guidance document for schools wishing to apply for Technology College status is available to schools on request, and is also available under 'Specialist Schools Information' on the DfEE Web Site (WNN.DfEE.Gov.UK/DfEEHOME. HTM). The guidance sets out the considerations taken into account when deciding to designate Technology Colleges and covers sponsorship, school and community development plans, and location.

Head Teachers (Leadership College)

19. **Mr. Gardiner:** To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what progress has been made in the development of a leadership college for head teachers. [85426]

Ms Estelle Morris: A prospectus for the College was launched by my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister on 2 June. The prospectus sets out our vision for the College and invites potential external partners to join with us in working to make the vision a reality. Copies of the prospectus have been placed in the Libraries.

National Childcare Strategy

20. **Mr. Colman:** To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what progress the National Childcare Strategy has made in providing extra child care places. [R] [85430]

Ms Hodge: The National Childcare Strategy has had a major impact in its first year. We have funded the creation of 65,590 new child care places in 1998–99 which far exceeds the ambitious target we set of 60,000 places. In the first two years of this Government we have created more child care places than were created during the entire period of office of the last Government.

New Deal (Young People)

Mrs. Curtis-Thomas: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment how many young people on the new deal are currently taking part in the education and training option. [85417]

Mr. Andrew Smith: The latest Government Statistical Service figures show that at the end of March 1999 there were 23,190 young people on the New Deal Full Time Education and Training Option.

Dr. Whitehead: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what progress is being made in developing employer-involvement in the New Deal for young unemployed people. [85403]

Mr. Andrew Smith: Employers are playing an ever-increasing role in New Deal. They are helping us strengthen its design, meet business needs through sector initiatives, in hospitality for example, and most importantly, provide sustained jobs for nearly 70,000 young people.

Tuition Fees

Mr. Willetts: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment if he will estimate the cost of exempting all university students living in *(a)* Scotland, *(b)* Wales, *(c)* Northern Ireland and *(d)* England from tuition fees. [84062]

Mr. Mudie *[holding answer 13 May 1999]:* The following table shows the estimated private contributions to tuition fees from home and other EU full-time undergraduate students studying in universities and colleges in Scotland, Wales, Northern Ireland and England in 2000–01. These represent the cost of fee exemption assuming no consequent change to loan eligibility. Estimates of tuition fee income from part-time and postgraduate students are not readily available.

£ million

	Financial year 2000–01
Scotland	41
Wales	23
Northern Ireland	13
England	333

For students ordinarily resident in England and Wales it is not possible to estimate separately the contributions from those aged over 21 and over 25.

The proportions of private contributions from those ordinarily resident in Scotland, and EU students at Scottish institutions, aged over 21 and over 25 are estimated to be 28 per cent. and 6 per cent. respectively. For students ordinarily resident in Northern Ireland the equivalent figures are estimated to be 10 per cent. and 4 per cent.

Secondary Schools (Wandsworth)

Mr. Cox: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what discussions he has had with the Education Department of the London Borough of Wandsworth on the number of children who have not obtained places in secondary schools in the borough for the September 1999 school entry. [85778]

Ms Estelle Morris: None. Arrangements for admission to schools are determined locally by the relevant admission authority, that is the local education authority for county and controlled schools, the governing body for voluntary aided and grant-maintained schools. While parents are able to say which school they would prefer, they may not gain a place at that school if it is popular and oversubscribed.

The local education authority is responsible for ensuring that a school place is available for every child living in its area whose parents want one. The places do not have to be provided at schools in its area. Where a child is without a school place because he or she has been refused admission to, or excluded from, every school within a reasonable travelling distance, the local education authority has the power to direct a school to admit the child.

I understand that Wandsworth Local Education Authority is monitoring the position and expects it to be satisfactorily resolved in due course.

European Social Fund

Mr. Healey: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment if a participant on a European Social Fund course of training is designated as an employee for the purposes of the *(a)* Sex Discrimination Act 1975 and *(b)* Race Relations Act 1976. [85753]

Mr. Andrew Smith: Participation in a course part-funded by ESF does not in itself confer employment status on an individual. An individual could be participating in an ESF course of training as an employee of a company or on a work placement which may confer employment status as a result of the agreed contractual arrangement of the employer and the individual.

If an individual is an employee then they are afforded the protection of the employment provisions of the Sex Discrimination Act 1975 and the Race Relations Act 1976.

Mr. Healey: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment if a participant on a European Social Fund course of training is entitled to take a complaint against *(a)* the training provider and *(b)* an employer with whom they may be doing work tasters or work placements as part of the course to an employment tribunal. [85754]

Mr. Andrew Smith: A participant in any vocational training course whether or not part-funded by ESF is entitled to bring a complaint of discrimination on the grounds of sex and/or race against a training provider in relation to provision or non-provision of that training which can be heard before an employment tribunal. In addition to any employment rights which a trainee participating in a course may have, it is unlawful for an employer to discriminate on the grounds of sex, race or disability in the way he affords or omits to afford access to the opportunity for training in the course of the employment. Any complaint can be considered by an employment tribunal.

First Aid

Mr. Paul Marsden: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what funding is given to schools to provide first aid training to school children. [85699]

Mr. Charles Clarke: There is no specific funding allocated to schools to provide first aid training, but schools may choose to use part of their budget to do so if they wish.

Mr. Paul Marsden: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment how many and what percentage of school children currently receive first aid training in schools; and if he will make a statement. [85701]

Mr. Charles Clarke: The Department for Education and Employment does not collect these data.

Mr. Paul Marsden: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment if he will introduce first aid training for all school children. [85700]

Mr. Charles Clarke: On 13 May, my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Education and Employment announced his proposals for the review of the National Curriculum in England. These include a non-statutory framework for Personal, Social and Health Education. At Key Stage 2 and 3, it is proposed that to develop a healthy lifestyle and keep themselves and others safe, pupils should be taught basic emergency aid procedures and where to get help and support.

National Minimum Wage

Mr. Rowlands: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment how many people in his Department and its associated bodies and agencies have benefited from the introduction of a national minimum wage. [86097]

Mr. Mudie: No staff have benefited from the introduction of the national minimum wage. When it was introduced on 1 April 1999, all staff earned more than the minimum wage.

Teachers (Consultation Paper)

Mr. Sawford: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment (1) how many responses to the consultation paper on teachers have been received; and how many and what percentage were received from *(a)* headteachers, *(b)* teachers, *(c)* governors and governing bodies, *(d)* education authorities and *(e)* others; [85738]

(2) in the responses to the consultation paper on teachers, how many and what percentage of *(a)* headteachers, *(b)* teachers, *(c)* governors and governing bodies, *(d)* education authorities and *(e)* others, expressed support for performance related pay. [85739]

Ms Estelle Morris: We have received 40,000 responses to the Green Paper, "teachers: meeting the challenge of change". 36,060 respondents replied using the Department's response form. These responses can be broken down as follows:

(a) 3,007 (8 per cent.) from headteachers;

(b) 20,752 (58 per cent.) from teachers;

(c) 11,343 (31 per cent.) from governors;

(d) 102 (0.3 per cent.) from local education authorities and

(e) 192 (2 per cent.) from others.

We will be making the outcome of the consultation exercise public once the responses have been fully analysed.

Early Years Services

Miss Begg: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what steps have been taken to safeguard the interests of the voluntary sector in early years services. [85423]

Ms Hodge: We have taken a number of steps to ensure that voluntary pre-schools and playgroups contribute fully to early education and care. The voluntary and private sectors have to be represented on the Early Years Development and Childcare Partnerships which plan the delivery and development of local early years service. Each partnership has to provide specifically for the involvement of voluntary providers; to assess the health of the non-maintained sector in their areas; and to show financial support that may be available. Plans for the provision of additional places for 3 year olds, for which we are making available new funding of £390 million over three years from September 1999, must also fully involve the voluntary sector.

The same principles apply to Sure Start, which will provide integrated and community-based services for 0 to 3s and their families. The voluntary sector is a significant partner in all 60 Trailblazer programmes, and leads some of them.

In March, I appointed an independent review team to advise on how pre-schools and playgroups can contribute further to the development of early education and child care; the team will report by August. Good voluntary pre-schools and playgroups that are in financial

difficulties will also be able to apply for special short term grants under the new £500,000 scheme also announced in March.

Parental Choice

Mr. Coaker: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what steps his Department has taken to increase the ability of parents to send their children to the school of their choice. [85431]

Ms Estelle Morris: Our commitment to increase parental choice is made clear in the Code of Practice on Admissions which came into force on 1 April. The Code reminds LEAs and governing bodies that they have an overriding duty to comply with parents' declared preferred school for their child. We want parents to be able to send their children to their preferred school wherever practicable, and LEAs should make every effort to ensure that they have sufficient school places to allow the maximum number of parents to obtain a place at a school of their choice. The funding we are providing to LEAs to meet our infant class size pledge will enable 12,000 extra places at popular schools to be achieved.

Reading

Mr. Dismore: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what steps have been taken by his Department to encourage parents to read to their young children. [85408]

Ms Estelle Morris: We have run a series of TV and radio adverts advertising a free leaflet entitled "A little reading goes a long way". The leaflet offers parents practical advice about how to read with their children. Over 1 million copies have been requested so far and a further 2 million have been distributed through various outlets, including supermarkets and doctors' waiting rooms.

Disability Rights Commission

Mr. Drew: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what representations he has received on his proposals for the establishment of a disability rights commission. [85404]

Ms Hodge: A public consultation on the Government White Paper "Promoting Disabled People's Rights—Creating a Disability Rights Commission fit for the 21st Century", was held last year.

Seven thousand individuals and organisations were sent a copy of the White Paper or a summary of it. Out of 626 responses, 94 per cent. supported the main proposals on the establishment and role of the Commission. An analysis of responses compiled by an independent market research organisation has been placed in the Library. The report is available in a range of alternative formats on request.

Five national consultation conferences on the White Paper held in September 1998 were attended by over 300 delegates from the business, public and voluntary sectors. The views of the delegates are also reflected in the report.

Literacy

Mr. Rammell: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what provisions the National Curriculum contains to ensure the teaching of literacy in primary schools. [85427]

Mr. Charles Clarke: We have successfully introduced the National Literacy Strategy, which includes a literacy hour for all primary school pupils. Under the national curriculum review proposals, the English programmes of study have been aligned with the National Literacy Strategy "Framework for teaching" so that they support it fully.

Head Teachers

Mr. David Taylor: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what steps his Department has taken to support and train headteachers. [85391]

Ms Estelle Morris: The contribution of the head is pivotal in leading schools to excellence and we are committed to helping all headteachers to develop the skills and knowledge they need. We are investing £100 million over the next three years to ensure heads have access to high quality, practical and professional training at every stage of their careers. As set out in the Green Paper, "teachers: meeting the challenge of change", we will build on the existing headship training programmes to develop a new national framework of training and development opportunities. Already, some 400 teachers have achieved the National Professional Qualification for Headship and some 6,000 are now in training. We are developing further the NPQH to build on the strengths of the qualification before making it a mandatory requirement for all those coming new to headship. The Green Paper also set out our intention to establish a National College for School Leadership. On 2 June we published our prospectus for the college, which will be a driving force for world-class leadership in schools, providing professional support for heads through cutting-edge training and development opportunities. Responsibility for designing and overseeing the existing headship programmes will move to the national college when it is established in 2000.

Cycling to School

Mr. Lock: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what funds his Department has allocated in the current and next two financial years to support cycling to school. [85392]

Mr. Charles Clarke: We have made over £100,000 available this financial year to support safer routes—including cycling—to school. We will be considering the case for further funding in the next two financial years.

Community Computer Centres

Mr. Wyatt: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment when the national body to deliver community computer centres will be established. [85411]

Mr. Charles Clarke: We are in the process of establishing a co-ordinating group to steer this important initiative and to advise my right hon. Friends the Secretary of State for Education and Employment and the Chief Secretary to the Treasury. An announcement will be made

before the summer and I expect the first learning centres to be established this year, but I can say that the group will have a broad range of members unpaid, including both Government officials and individuals with experience in the private sector.

Further Education

Mr. Boswell: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment if he will make a statement on recent developments in Government action to widen participation in further education. [85425]

Mr. Mudie: We are committed to widening participation in further education and have taken action to achieve this.

We have secured an excellent financial settlement for further education which will enable significant progress to be made towards securing an extra 700,000 students in further education in 2001–02 compared to 1997–98. This expansion is principally focused on widening participation to those who have not traditionally taken advantage of learning opportunities. We have also announced a new Further Education Student Support package, targeted at those most in need, which will come into force from September.

The introduction of the University for Industry and Individual Learning Accounts, from next year, will both assist in removing barriers to learning and widening participation in further education.

New Deal (North-West)

Mr. Pike: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment how many people in the North West have been through the New Deal since its commencement. [85428]

Mr. Andrew Smith: The latest Government Statistical Service figures to the end of March 1999 show that 37,790 young people, in the Employment Service North West region, have joined the New Deal for young people since it started in the first Pathfinder areas in January 1998. Of these 17,800 have left, leaving 19,900 still participating at some stage of the New Deal process.

Schools (Disabled Access)

Mr. Gareth R. Thomas: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what support has been given to schools to enable them to become accessible to those with disabilities. [85429]

Mr. Charles Clarke: The Schools Access Initiative gives capital support to make more mainstream schools accessible to disabled pupils and those with sensory impairments. It has run each year since 1996 and a total of £25 million had been allocated by March 1999. A further £100 million has been earmarked over the next three years.

PRIME MINISTER

Macedonia

Mr. Worthington: To ask the Prime Minister what undertakings were given to the Government of Macedonia during his recent visit to Macedonia, with respect to *(a)* levels of aid from the United Kingdom, *(b)* the willingness of the United Kingdom to accept refugees from Macedonia, *(c)* assistance and the speed of delivery of assistance from the European Union and *(d)* help from international financial institutions; and what progress has been made in fulfilling these undertakings. [84788]

The Prime Minister *[holding answer 24 May 1999]:* During my visit to Macedonia, I gave the following undertakings to the Government of Macedonia:

(a) The UK would allocate an additional £20 million for humanitarian assistance to the refugees in the region, including Macedonia, making a total of £40 million since the crisis started. £14.5 million of the additional £20 million has now been committed. I also promised £5 million of technical assistance to Macedonia to increase the capacity of the Government to absorb international assistance and to carry out reform. The Department for International Development is in the process of identifying suitable projects.

(b) I made clear to the Government of Macedonia that the UK was willing to accept refugees from Macedonia provided that they were properly selected by the UNHCR. The Government have since accelerated the arrival of refugees from the region and has now taken 2,782 people.

(c) I promised the Macedonian Government to press for the European Union to disperse the 25 million euro of budgetary assistance as soon as possible. I spoke subsequently to the President of the Commission to make sure that this happened. The first instalment was paid by the European Commission on 12 May, the second instalment will be released on 1 July and the third on 15 October. The European Commission has also provided technical assistance to the Macedonian Treasury to help them to disburse these funds through the budget.

(d) On my return from Macedonia, I also spoke to the Managing Director of the IMF in advance of the Donor Conference on assistance to Macedonia on 5 May. I asked that the IMF and other international financial institutions should speed up their support for Macedonia. At the Donor Conference, the international community, including the international financial institutions, pledged $252 million in financial assistance to Macedonia.

Post-16 Training and Education

Mr. Green: To ask the Prime Minister when he received a report from the Department for Education and Employment on the review of post-16 training and education. [85723]

The Prime Minister: As is the case for any aspect of developing government policy, my office has received regular reports on the progress of the Review, and my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Education and Employment will be making an announcement about our proposals in due course.

Weapons

Mr. Dalyell: To ask the Prime Minister what is his policy on the use of depleted uranium and cluster bombs by British forces; and if he will make a statement. [85351]

The Prime Minister *[holding answer 9 June 1999]:* It is our policy to use cluster bombs in circumstances where there is a military requirement to do so, and our normal

criteria for minimising collateral damage can be satisfied. Cluster bombs are the most effective weapon available against concentrations of armoured and soft-skinned vehicles, artillery, anti-aircraft artillery or fielded forces. In the current conflict in the Balkans, cluster bombs are being used against specific, identified military targets and a high level of accuracy is being achieved.

Depleted uranium weapons are not weapons of mass and indiscriminate destruction. They are ammunition designed specifically to penetrate tank armour on the battlefield and do not have effects on the wider population. Their use is not prohibited under any international agreements, including the Geneva Conventions.

DU-based ammunition have not been used by UK forces during military operations against Iraq since the 1990–1991 Gulf conflict; neither have they been used by UK forces in recent operations in the Balkans. Nevertheless, if the operational situation and the safety of UK troops required such a capability, DU-based ammunition would be deployed and used.

Correspondence

Mr. McNamara: To ask the Prime Minister if he will place a copy of the letter sent from his chief of staff to the leader of the Ulster Unionist Party on Monday 17 May in the Library. [86138]

The Prime Minister *[holding answer 9 June 1999]:* It is not the normal practice of Government to publish communications sent in confidence, in line with paragraph 2 of Part II of the Code of Practice on Access to Government Information.

President Clinton

Mr. Matthew Taylor: To ask the Prime Minister, pursuant to his answer of 17 May 1999, *Official Report*, column *267*, on meetings with President Clinton, how many meetings he held with members and officials of the United States Government during his visit of 21 to 25 April; and if he will list the dates and locations of each meeting, and the names of the members and officials of the United States Government at each meeting. [86297]

The Prime Minister: During my visit to the United States of America in April, I met President Clinton on a number of occasions, both privately and during sessions of the NATO Summit.

HOUSE OF COMMONS

CD-ROM (Official Report)

Mr. Webb: To ask the Chairman of the Information Committee when hon. Members will receive the CD-ROM version of the *Official Report* for the 1997–98 Parliamentary Session, and what plans he has to reduce the time taken to prepare the CD-ROM. [86397]

Mr. Allan: The final disc of the CD-ROM of the *Official Report* for the 1997–98 Parliamentary Session covering the whole of the Session 1997–98 was published on 10 June 1999.

Hansard in CD-ROM is not produced under the direction of the Authorities of the House and, therefore, the time taken to prepare the CD-ROM is a matter for the commercial judgment of the companies involved.

Expenses Claims

Mr. Webb: To ask the Chairman of the Information Committee if his Committee will investigate the feasibility of allowing hon. Members to submit electronically expenses claims and other standard forms to the House authorities. [86398]

Mr. Allan: The Department of Finance and Administration (the Fees Office and the Finance Office) are actively looking at a number of options, following the results of the Members' survey in January, for making services more accessible to Members, including the submission of claims electronically. There are a number of factors—costs, technical and security issues—to be considered and resolved before it can be established whether such an arrangement could be introduced.

HOME DEPARTMENT

Domestic Violence

Jackie Ballard: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what assessment he has made of the likely impact on domestic violence statistics of the change of definition which has been issued to police forces. [85918]

Mr. Boateng: The previous definition was being interpreted in a number of different ways. A new definition was necessary in order to bring about more precise, consistent and comparable returns to Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Constabulary so as to give more accurate knowledge of the number of incidents of violence between current or former partners that are reported to the police.

Because of the range of interpretations given to the existing definition, it is not easy to gauge the exact result of the change. For some forces, the new definition may not represent a significant change. For others, the new definition will narrow the interpretation which they have been using, with the result that they will probably record slightly fewer domestic violence incidents.

National Minimum Wage

Mr. Rowlands: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many people in his Department and its associated bodies and agencies have benefited from the introduction of a national minimum wage. [86098]

Mr. Straw: 105 people have benefited from the introduction of a national minimum wage.

Sir Roger Casement

Mr. John D. Taylor: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department (1) what is the nature of the files relating to the black diaries allegedly written by Sir Roger Casement which have yet to be released into the public domain; [86153]

(2) what representations he has received from the Irish Prime Minister regarding the black diaries allegedly written by Sir Roger Casement; and what plans he has to release further documents at his request. [86225]

Mr. Straw: All Home Office records relating to Roger Casement are open to public inspection at the Public Record Office. No representations have been received from the Irish Prime Minister regarding the Casement diaries.

Asylum and Immigration Appeals

Mr. Clappison: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will publish the number of (1) new instructions and (2) disposals in *(a)* asylum and *(b)* immigration appeals undertaken by (i) the Immigration Advisory Service and (ii) the Refugee Legal Centre for 1997–98 and the number of appeals in both categories disposed of by the Immigration Appellate Authority in the same period together with the unit cost in both categories. [70755]

Mr. Mike O'Brien *[pursuant to his reply, 22 February 1999, c. 104]:* The information requested is shown in the table.

It should be noted that the figures for the Refugee Legal Centre (RLC) and the Immigration Advisory Service (IAS) are based on outcomes (those cases in which the appeal has been disposed of) rather than outputs (those cases in which representation has been provided, but the appeal may or may not have finally been disposed). The number of cases dealt with by the RLC based on outputs is 8,154. The IAS do not have any comparable statistical information on outputs.

1997–98

	New instructions		*Appeals disposed of*		
	Asylum	*Immigration*	*Asylum*	*Immigration*	*Unit cost £*
Refugee Legal Centre	6,123	—	4,454	—	796.38
Immigration Advisory Service	3,020	4,667	1,279	3,536	[1]640.89
Immigration Appellate Authority	—	—	[2]18,600	[2]11,200	—

[1] Overall unit cost for asylum and immigration cases
[2] Both rounded to the nearest 00

AGRICULTURE, FISHERIES AND FOOD

Slaughtering Industry

Mr. Tyler: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food if he will list *(a)* the organisations currently consulted by his Ministry on the impact of proposed charges on the slaughtering industry and *(b)* other organisations which have made representations to his Ministry on this issue, or have been consulted on it, since May 1997. [84077]

Mr. Rooker *[holding answer 14 May 1999]:* The information requested by the hon. Member has been placed in the Libraries of the House.

Agriculture Council

Mr. Maclean: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food if he will list those areas *(a)* he will raise and *(b)* he expects other member states will raise at the forthcoming Agriculture Council meeting on 30 May to 1 June. [85636]

Mr. Nick Brown: The meeting scheduled for 30 May to 1 June in Dresden is an informal meeting of EU Agriculture Ministers. As is usual for such meetings, there is no formal agenda and no official documents will be discussed. The only item scheduled for discussion is a German Presidency Paper on "Sustainable Rural Development: Agricultural Structure Policy for Rural Areas".

Genetically Modified Feed

Mr. Yeo: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what plans he has to improve the labelling of animal feedstuffs that may contain genetically modified ingredients. [86131]

Mr. Nick Brown *[holding answer 8 June 1999]:* The Government are pressing the Commission to forward to the Council its proposed Regulation covering novel animal feeds. This is necessary to ensure fair and consistent labelling in the EU. We are exploring whether national labelling arrangements are feasible pending the introduction of EC measures.

Written Answers to Questions

Friday 11 June 1999

ENVIRONMENT, TRANSPORT AND THE REGIONS

Coastguard

Mrs. Dunwoody: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions on how many occasions in the period January to April 1999 staffing levels at the Coastguard stations at (i) Oban, (ii) Liverpool, (iii) Belfast and (iv) Stornoway were maintained by the use of unqualified or partly-qualified staff. [85838]

Ms Glenda Jackson *[holding answer 8 June 1999]:*

	Oban	*Liverpool*	*Belfast*	*Stornoway*
Unqualified				
12 hour watch	0	4	0	0
Partly Qualified				
12 hour watch	0	93	60	116
6 hour watch	0	6	5	0

Recruits who have yet to qualify in their grade are able to perform certain tasks on watch almost immediately but under the supervision of a watch manager. Watch managers are encouraged to involve new recruits in watchkeeping tasks as much as possible.

Partly Qualified Officers are those who after their initial training have demonstrated their ability to their line management to undertake certain tasks appropriate to their grade, thus enabling them to become part of a Watch. Initial training is followed by further on the job training which take place at their parent station. This on the job training as part of the Watch, or as a supernumerary, is essential preparation for an officer's final proficiency examinations for qualification to their grade.

Bus Companies

Mr. Jenkin: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will list for each of the 17 municipally owned bus companies their *(a)* annual turnover, *(b)* passenger revenues, *(c)* pre-tax profit or loss, *(d)* numbers of staff and *(e)* numbers of vehicles operated. [86666]

Ms Glenda Jackson: Under the Transport Act 1985 the local authority-owned bus companies were set up as Companies Act companies working at arms length from their owners. As the details required by the Companies Acts are lodged at Companies House, my Department does not collect the data requested.

Departmental Expenditure

Mr. Colman: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what proposals he has to change his departmental expenditure limits and running costs limits for 1999–2000. [86984]

Mr. Prescott: Subject to Parliamentary approval of the necessary Supplementary Estimates, my departmental expenditure limits will change as follows.

The voted Local Government Departmental Expenditure Limit will be increased by £3,900,000, increasing the overall limit from £34,207,667,000 to £34,211,567,000. This increase reflects revised estimates of the costs of preparing for the Greater London Authority. The increase will be offset by a corresponding reduction in the Department's Main Programmes Departmental Expenditure Limit from £9,696,757,000 to £9,692,857,000.

Greater London Authority

Mr. Colman: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what steps he is taking to provide the Greater London Authority with accommodation and administrative support. [86985]

Mr. Raynsford: I announced on 26 February plans for a new building for the headquarters of the Greater London Authority (GLA) at London Bridge City. Design and contractual issues are being finalised, and I anticipate the building being ready for occupation towards the end of 2001.

To house the GLA before the new building is ready, my Department is arranging temporary office accommodation at Romney House, Marsham Street, London SW1, which should be ready for occupation by staff preparing for the GLA by the end of 1999.

The GLA will assume its responsibilities on 3 July 2000, eight weeks after the elections, and work therefore needs to be put in hand now to establish finance and other systems and to ensure that appropriate administrative machinery is in place. I announced on 31 March that Dr. Bob Chilton would be seconded from the Audit Commission to be Head of Transition: he took up his duties on 19 April, and will work closely with my officials to take this work forward.

My Department has earmarked £30 million from within existing budgets over the four years 1998–99 to 2001–02 to meet GLA preparation costs. This will cover the anticipated cost of fitting out, furnishing and equipping the new building, including professional and other specialist advice; providing temporary accommodation for the GLA; accommodating and equipping the transition team; and setting up new financial, management and communication systems for the GLA. This compares to an initial provision of £20 million, which was largely to cover the cost of providing a new building. I will provide more detailed estimates when commercial negotiations have been completed, and will report actual expenditure totals periodically.

Separate provision is being made to cover the cost of the first elections to the GLA, including publicity, and establishing Transport for London and the London Development Agency. A separate announcement is being

made about a loan from the Contingencies Fund in relation to some of these costs. The arrangements for establishing the Metropolitan Police Authority and the London Fire and Emergency Planning Authority are matters for the Home Secretary.

Mr. Gardiner: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what statutory authority exists for costs to be incurred by him in 1999–2000 in preparation for the establishment of the Greater London Authority and its functional and other associated bodies. [86986]

Mr. Raynsford: Further to the answer I gave to my hon. Friend the Member for Battersea (Mr. Linton) on 2 February 1999, *Official Report*, column *568*, pending Parliamentary approval, urgent expenditure on new services for the bodies other than the Greater London Authority in 1999–2000 estimated at £4.7 million will be met by repayable advances from the Contingencies Fund.

Sellafield

Mr. Eric Clarke: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what progress he has made in his consideration of the draft decisions submitted to him by the Environment Agency on Sellafield MOX plant. [85629]

Mr. Prescott: The Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food and I have looked very carefully at the recommendations made by the Environment Agency about the justification for the MOX plant. We have also examined the representations made to us about the plant. Our provisional conclusion is that the balance of the argument so far is in favour of justification. However, we have also come to the conclusion that there should be further consultations on the economic case for the plant. We were concerned that the version of the report by PA Consulting on the economic case for the plant, which had been published by the Agency in January last year, did not contain as much information as the public could reasonably expect to see. We have therefore decided to publish a fuller version of the report. We accept, however, that some material contained in the report is commercially confidential and cannot be published without potentially harming BNFL's commercial interests. This information has been omitted from the version we are publishing.

In view of the time that has passed since PA Consulting completed their report, we decided to commission from BNFL an up-to-date assessment of the market for MOX fuel. This assessment is also being published. Comments are being invited on this material by 23 July after which we shall take a final decision on the full operation of the plant.

While this consultation is under way, and given our view that the balance of the argument currently favours justification we have concluded that it would be right for BNFL to be allowed to proceed with the uranium commissioning of the plant. We concluded that it would be right to allow this before final conclusions are reached about whether to give the go-ahead for the full operation of the plant. This would enable BNFL to begin testing the plant before the introduction of plutonium. In this way, if the plant is eventually given the go-ahead, the delays in running the plant commercially would be minimised. If, after the consultation exercise we decide that full operation is not justified, the process would be halted and uranium removed from the plant. The costs of removal, estimated at £2 million, would be met by BNFL.

TRADE AND INDUSTRY

MOX Fuel Shipment (Japan)

Mr. Brake: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry if the conclusions of the Environment Agency on plutonium extraction from MOX fuel were assessed by his Department when determining the security measures necessary for the shipping of MOX fuel to Japan. [86740]

Mr. Battle: The physical protection measures necessary for the shipping of MOX fuel to Japan are based on the recommendations of the International Atomic Energy Agency concerned with the movement of all Category I nuclear materials.

Telecoms Data Protection Directive

Gillian Merron: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry when he expects to be able to make available draft regulations implementing the EC Telecoms Data Protection Directive (97/66/EC). [87025]

Mr. Wills: I have placed copies of the draft regulations in the Library of the House and these are also available in the Vote office. I am also making the draft Regulations available on the DTI Website at: www.dti.gov.uk/cii/tdpd/regs2/index.htm

Offer and Ofgas

Gillian Merron: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what changes will be made to the cash and running costs limits for the Office of Electricity Regulation and the Office for Gas Regulation. [87026]

Mr. Byers: Offer: Subject to Parliamentary approval of the necessary revised Estimate, the running cost limit will be increased by £10,100,000 from £18,100,000 to £28,200,000.

This increase reflects the additional resources required by the Director General of Electricity Supply for the funding of the Review of Electricity Trading Arrangements (RETA) project (£11,200,000) and an accounting adjustment in respect of VAT receipts for contracted out services (£1,100,000). The increase will be offset by additional receipts and will not therefore add to the planned total of public expenditure.

Ofgas: The running cost limit for Class IX Vote 9—the Office of Gas Regulation—will be decreased by £938,000 from £12,938,000 to £12,000,000. This decrease reflects an accounting adjustment in respect of VAT receipts for contracted out services.

Small Business

Mr. Cotter: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what research his Department has conducted into the awareness of Business Support services among small business owners. [86668]

Mr. Wills: DTI commissioned MORI to undertake five surveys of tracking research between 1994 and 1997 on awareness of Business Support services, including

Business Link. The most recent survey was in September 1997. Each survey involved a national telephone survey of a random sample of directors of businesses with between 10 and 200 employees in England, with a smaller sample of businesses with between five and nine employees for comparison. Research on awareness of Business Support services has also been carried out before and after national marketing campaign exercises for Business Link.

Mr. Cotter: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what estimate he has made of the costs to small businesses of the change of telephone codes; and what related discussions he has had with Oftel. [86669]

Mr. Wills: The administration of the National Numbering Scheme is a matter for Oftel. Oftel has not carried out any specific research into the costs to small businesses relating to changes to telephone codes. The changes to geographic codes were made in response to the views of consumers and businesses following "Phoneday" in 1995 in order to meet additional demands for numbers. In order to minimise the costs to businesses Oftel has given long periods of notice of changes, put in place parallel running for old and new numbers and "changed number" announcements. This enables businesses to plan for the future. Oftel has consulted extensively on changes to numbering arrangements and Oftel has kept my officials fully informed.

Business Links

Mr. Cotter: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what was the total expenditure of Business Links in each of the last three financial years; and what proportion of that was on *(a)* salaries and *(b)* administration. [86636]

Mr. Wills: Business Links are private, independent organisations and the Department does not collect statistics on the total expenditure of Business Links or individual elements of it.

Mr. Cotter: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what was his Department's total expenditure on Business Links in *(a)* 1997–98 and *(b)* 1998–99; and what expenditure is planned for 1999–2000. [86638]

Mr. Wills: The total amount of funding provided for the Business Link programme by the Department in the periods 1997–98 and 1998–99 were £129.2 million and £121.1 million respectively. For 1999–2000 the Department has earmarked £139 million for Business Link programme funding, which includes an element of funding specifically for developing services of the new Small Business Service.

Gas Suppliers

Mr. Harvey: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what representations he has received concerning customers complaining that their gas supplier has been changed without their consent; what gas suppliers have been disciplined by Ofgas owing to their conduct in transferring customer accounts; and if he will make a statement. [85714]

Mr. Battle: The Department has received a number of representations from consumers complaining about the involuntary transfer of their gas supply. I have great sympathy for consumers who have experienced difficulties in this respect, and understand the worry and inconvenience that such occurrences can cause. I have asked my officials to work with Ofgas and the Gas Consumers Council to root out the causes of the problems and identify areas for action to tackle them urgently.

I am determined that the industry should have in place systems which work effectively and consistently to transfer customers from existing to new suppliers without error and that these should be properly regulated. The Office of Gas Supply continually monitors industry performance and should pursue rigorously any instances of failure with the companies concerned. Action has been taken by Ofgas under both the Competition Act 1980 and the Gas Act 1986 against a number of companies to secure a commitment to improve standards of performance. I have asked the Director General for an update on the situation and on the action he has in hand.

Company Directors (Insolvencies)

Mr. Laurence Robertson: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what statutory provisions regulate the ability of directors of companies which have become insolvent starting up in a similar line of business with a new company; what changes he is planning to introduce; and if he will make a statement. [86414]

Dr. Howells: A Director's involvement with a company which has become insolvent does not, of itself, preclude his or her from being a Director of a new company unless:

(a) contrary to the provisions of S216 of the Insolvency Act 1986, it has the same or a similar name to the company which failed;

or

(b) the director has been disqualified from so acting under the Companies Directors Disqualification Act 1986.

When Parliamentary time allows we plan to introduce legislation to improve the efficiency and effectiveness of the procedure for disqualifying unfit company directors. There are no plans to make any other change in this area.

Genetically Modified Crops

Joan Ruddock: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what advice he has received about the use of genetically modified crops in the production of cosmetics and perfumes with respect to *(a)* skin allergies and *(b)* treatments of skin complaints by antibiotics. [86671]

Dr. Howells: We have not received advice in relation to genetically modified crops and the production of cosmetics and perfumes. The number of cosmetic ingredients which may be derived from GMOs is estimated to be less than 1 per cent. However, we are supportive of the moves proposed by the European Commission Scientific Steering Committee to develop harmonised guidelines for Genetically Modified Organism (GMO) risk assessments for cosmetic products.

CABINET OFFICE

Correspondence

Gillian Merron: To ask the Minister for the Cabinet Office if he will publish the latest figures showing the volume of correspondence received by Ministers and Agency Chief Executives from hon. Members, the targets set for reply, and the percentage of replies sent within targets. [87028]

Dr. Jack Cunningham: The 1998 correspondence figures are set out in the following table. The table also sets out the figures for 1997, first published on 31 July 1998, *Official Report*, columns *643–46*. Members' attention is drawn to the footnotes which accompany the table and which provide general background information on how totals have been calculated.

Correspondence from Members of Parliament to Ministers and Agency Chief Executives

Department or Agency	1997 Target set for reply (working days)	1997 Number of letters received	1997 Percentage of replies within target	1998 Target set for reply (working days)	1998 Number of letters received	1998 Percentage of replies within target
Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food	15	7,423	76	15	[8]8,058	57
Cabinet Office	15	341	96	15	292	96
Crown Prosecution Service	15	39	85	15	[9]66	88
Department for Culture, Media and Sport	18	2,939	78	18	3,387	86
HM Customs and Excise	18	4,291	20	18	[10]4,439	16
Ministry of Defence	15	4,719	65	15	[11]5,619	53
Army Base Repair Organisation	—	—	—	15	11	100
Army Personnel Centre	15	19	64	15	43	96
Defence Evaluation and Research Agency	12	27	93	15	42	79
Naval Recruiting and Training Agency	—	—	—	15	29	100
Department for International Development	15	2,994	89	15	2,613	91
Department for Education and Employment	15	22,460	71	15	[12]19,766	70
Employment Service	15	1,837	93	15	630	92
Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions	15	31,798	58	15	[13]38,059	51
DVLA	7	299	96	7	453	99
Driving Standards Agency	15	194	78	15	108	85
Highways Agency	12	468	71	15	480	83
Marine and Coastguard Agency	15	25	100	15	[14]21	100
Planning Inspectorate	8	296	94	8	[15]286	87
Vehicle Inspectorate	15	24	96	15	20	100
Foreign and Commonwealth Office	7	8,735	95	7	[16]10,040	85
Department of Health	20	14,547	76	20	[17]10,648	61
NHS Pensions Agency	15	78	76	15	42	74
Medicines Control Agency	—	—	—	10	37	73
Home Office	15	16,831	20	15	17,875	32
	20	1,175	22	20	[18]875	52
HM Prison Service	15	2,702	61	[19]20	2,400	69
UK Passport Agency	10	101	97	[20]10	181	96
Inland Revenue	18	3,323	40	18	[21]6,305	20
	23	375	79	23	[22]193	100
Valuation Office	23	74	31	23	47	36
Legal Secretariat to the Law Officers	15	301	88	15	[23]291	80
Lord Chancellor's Department	20	1,884	76	20	2,672	78
Court Service	20	1,391	99	20	[24]1,230	99
HM Land Registry	20	37	100	20	36	100
Public Trust Office	15	65	98	15	63	98
Northern Ireland Office (including Northern Ireland Departments)	10	2,163	59	10	2,001	70
Child Support Agency	10	144	67	10	104	87
Compensation Agency	—	—	—	7	25	100
Northern Ireland Prison Service	10	48	92	10	35	66
Planning Service	15	78	77	10	62	74
Rate Collection Agency	5	12	92	5	10	90
Rivers Agency	15	13	85	15	32	97
Road Service	15	23	87	10	35	97
Social Security Agency	10	94	78	10	70	93
Water Service	15	37	92	10	48	85
Office for National Statistics	10	269	92	10	[25]679	88
President of the Council's Office	15	102	91	15	230	88
The Scottish Office	17	4,722	65	17	5,650	60
Historic Scotland	17	23	91	17	36	100
Scottish Courts Service	17	11	82	17	17	97
Scottish Office Pensions Agency	17	38	97	17	45	100
Scottish Prison Service	17	145	97	17	119	95
Student Awards Agency for Scotland	17	240	70	17	112	50
Department of Social Security	20	17,585	51	20	19,330	31
Benefits Agency	20	3,314	89	20	2,797	56
Child Support Agency	20	8,182	99	20	8,365	100
Contributions Agency	20	338	89	20	280	37
War Pensions Agency	20	693	99	20	529	98

Correspondence from Members of Parliament to Ministers and Agency Chief Executives

Department or Agency	*1997 Target set for reply (working days)*	*1997 Number of letters received*	*1997 Percentage of replies within target*	*1998 Target set for reply (working days)*	*1998 Number of letters received*	*1998 Percentage of replies within target*
Department of Trade and Industry	10	19,459	61	10	[iii]22,193	50
Companies House	10	41	100	10	38	100
Employment Tribunal Service	—	—	—	10	78	90
Insolvency Service	10	27	100	10	19	100
Radiocommunications Agency	10	27	96	10	15	100
HM Treasury	15	4,553	54	15	[iii]7,086	37
Treasury Solicitor's Department	15	39	100	15	[viii]44	98
Welsh Office	15	2,998	75	15	3,913	71
CADW (Welsh Historic Monuments)	12	65	83	10	38	97

Notes on 1998 Figures[19]

[i] Includes correspondence for the Intervention Board.
[ii] Includes those letters addressed to the Law Officers but subsequently replied to by the Director of Public Prosecutions, excluding letters addressed to the DPP.
[iii] Includes all Ministerial replies, not only replies to Members of Parliament.
[iv] Includes 940 letters where Agency Chief Executives replied on Ministers' behalf. Interim replies are not included in the overall performance.
[v] 67 per cent. of letters were replied to within 20 working days.
[vi] Figures from 1 April 1998–31 December 1998.
[vii] Includes 56 cases relating to Wales.
[viii] In addition, the FCO's migration and visa department received 9,453 letters direct from MP's in 1998, of which 47 per cent. were replied to within 15 working days.
[ix] 1997 and 1998 figures are not directly comparable, as a new data system now provides figures relating to letters received from MPs only
[x] Prison Service Director General cases which includes correspondence that Ministers passed on to be answered under delegated arrangements.
[xi] UKPA Chief Executive cases.
[xii] Includes letters for HM Prison Service where Ministers replied.
[xiii] Head Office figures.
[xiv] Local Office and "delegated" figures (where local officials reply direct to MPs).
[xv] This figure excludes letters which were subsequently replied to by the Director of Public Prosecutions.
[xvi] Includes letters where correspondence has been received direct to the Chief Executive or transferred to the Chief Executive for reply.
[xvii] Includes 579 letters where the Chief Executive replied on Ministers' behalf.
[xviii] Includes 13 letters where the Chief Executive replied on Ministers' behalf.
[19] The 1997 figures are taken from the *Official Report*, 31 July 1998, columns *643–46*. Please also refer to the notes given with that reply. Departments and Agencies which received a total of between 1 and 10 letters from MPs during 1998 are not shown in this table.

HOUSE OF COMMONS

Staff Pay Settlement

Mr. Pike: To ask the hon. Member for Roxburgh and Berwickshire, representing the House of Commons Commission, when the 1999 pay settlement for House of Commons staff will be implemented; and if he will make a statement. [85971]

Mr. Kirkwood: There are four groups of House of Commons staff covered by separate pay settlements each year. They are the Senior Commons Staff (SCS), the Main Structure Staff (Pay Bands A to E), the Refreshment Department Catering Staff and the Works Directorate Craft Staff.

The pay of the Senior Commons Staff is kept in line with that of the Senior Civil Service. The Government accepted the recommendations of the Senior Salaries Review Body in February and the recommended increases have been implemented with effect from 1 April 1999.

The negotiations with the unions recognised to represent staff in Pay Bands A to E started in April 1999 and are continuing.

The negotiations with the unions representing staff in the Craft and Catering pay bands are expected to start towards the end of June.

The implementation date for all the settlements is 1 April 1999.

SOCIAL SECURITY

Personal Documents (Confiscation)

Mr. Rendel: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security if he will list the powers he has to confiscate *(a)* passports, *(b)* national insurance cards and *(c)* driving licences. [86665]

Mr. Timms: The Secretary of State for Social Security has no express powers to confiscate passports, national insurance cards or driving licences. However, these documents remain the property of Her Majesty's Government. If the Secretary of State has concerns that such a document may be forged, altered or stolen, he may retain it. A receipt is issued and the appropriate authority notified.

PRIME MINISTER

Debt Burden

Dr. Cable: To ask the Prime Minister what assessment he has made of the likely progress at the forthcoming G7 Summit in reducing the debt burden of the poorest countries; and if he will make a statement. [85724]

The Prime Minister: At the G8 Summit in Cologne next weekend I will be taking forward the UK's proposals for faster, deeper and wider debt relief to the world's poorest countries.

Kosovo and Serbia (Ground Invasion)

Mr. Dalyell: To ask the Prime Minister if he will make a statement on the Government's policy on a ground invasion of *(a)* Kosovo and *(b)* Serbia. [85897]

The Prime Minister *[holding answer 8 June 1999]:* There is now evidence that the Yugoslav authorities are complying with the demands of the international community. My hon. Friend will be aware that following confirmation of the start of the withdrawal of Yugoslav forces from Kosovo, the NATO Secretary General ordered the suspension of the bombing campaign. An international peacekeeping force in which British troops will be at the forefront will be deployed within the timescale agreed between General Jackson and Serb military commanders on 9 June. Until this withdrawal is complete, however, we must continue to exercise caution and to keep all other options under review.

Ethnic Hungarians

Mr. Dalyell: To ask the Prime Minister if he will make a statement on his discussions with the Prime Minister of Hungary in relation to the safety of the ethnic Hungarians living in northern Yugoslavia, and on the concerns of the Hungarian Prime Minister about the threat to ethnic Hungarians from Serbian military forces and paramilitaries positioned near their homes. [85900]

The Prime Minister *[holding answer 8 June 1999]:* I met the Hungarian Prime Minister in Downing Street on 15 April. We discussed the situation of the ethnic Hungarian community in Vojvodina. Mr. Orban said that a substantial number of ethnic Hungarians had left the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia in recent years for Hungary. He expressed concern that the rights of the ethnic Hungarians in Vojvodina were inadequate and that the authorities of the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia had deliberately resettled Serb refugees in areas which hitherto had an ethnic Hungarian majority.

I reaffirmed the United Kingdom's support for the democratisation of the whole of the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia as the best way to safeguard the rights of all its citizens.

Quarantine

Jackie Ballard: To ask the Prime Minister if he will list the representations he received regarding the quarantine of the pet dog of William Dowell. [86630]

The Prime Minister: In addition to letters from William Dowell and his family, my office has received four letters on this subject, all from France.

Jackie Ballard: To ask the Prime Minister what plans he has to abolish quarantine for animals entering the United Kingdom. [86631]

The Prime Minister: On 26 March, the Government announced that they were going to reform the quarantine laws in the UK. A pilot scheme is being developed for introduction as soon as possible and the main scheme will be in place by April 2001.

Council of Europe

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Prime Minister what the Government's policy is towards the development of the Council of Europe. [86645]

The Prime Minister: The Government support the development of the Council of Europe as a key institution for the promotion of the values of human rights, democracy and the rule of law throughout Europe, and for the strengthening of the political, legal, social and cultural cohesion of the continent.

The enlargement of the Council of Europe's membership to include the new democracies of Eastern Europe has given it a central role in European unification. The Government believe that to take forward this role it is essential that the Council re-affirm its structures and redefine its priorities to be able to act more effectively as a force for democratic stability. The Government therefore strongly support the recommendations of the report adopted by Ministers in Budapest in May. We want to see a strong and energetic and effective Council of Europe ready to face the new millennium.

Parliamentary Answers

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Prime Minister what were the reasons for the time taken in providing a full answer to the question of the hon. Member for South Holland and The Deepings (Mr. Hayes) of 20 May 1999, *Official Report*, column *403*. [86716]

The Prime Minister: The hon. Member's question—which asked for the figures showing that the Labour Party represents more rural constituencies than any other party—was due for answer on Tuesday 18 May and I gave a full reply two days later. The delay was due to the fact that on Monday 17 and Tuesday 18 May, I was in Bulgaria and Albania visiting British troops and meeting Kosovar refugees and the leaders of these frontline states.

Holocaust Remembrance Day

Mr. Dismore: To ask the Prime Minister what plans the Government have to introduce a Holocaust Remembrance day; and if he will make a statement. [86654]

The Prime Minister: I am determined to ensure that the horrendous crimes against humanity committed during the Holocaust are never forgotten. The ethnic cleansing and killing that has taken place in Europe in recent weeks are a stark example of the need for vigilance.

The Government are considering a proposal for a Holocaust Remembrance Day and I have asked my right hon. Friend the Home Secretary to consult widely about this.

TREASURY

Inland Revenue

Ms Lawrence: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what changes are proposed to the Inland Revenue Departmental Expenditure Limit for 1999–2000. [87027]

Dawn Primarolo: There are no plans to change the overall Departmental Expenditure Limit of the Inland Revenue. However, subject to Parliamentary approval of

the necessary Supplementary Estimate for Class XVI, Vote 4, the Voted element of the Departmental Expenditure Limit will be increased by £46,319,000 from £1,836,316,000 to £1,882,635,000 to reflect the costs of administering working families tax credits and disabled persons tax credits from October 1999. The increase will be offset by a matching reduction in the non-voted element from £34,910,000 to -£11,409,000 reflecting the take-up of retained provision.

The Supplementary Estimate is subject to the passage of the Tax Credits Bill which has been laid before Parliament. The provision will not be used until the enabling legislation has been enacted or, in the event of the legislation not passing into law, further authority has been obtained from Parliament.

FOREIGN AND COMMONWEALTH AFFAIRS

Mr. and Mrs. Adams

Mr. Willis: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will take steps to persuade the Florida State Prosecutor to drop all charges of child abuse against Mr. and Mrs. Adams of Harrogate and obtain an apology for the way they were treated at St. Petersburg Beach, Florida. [86678]

Mr. Hoon: The Government do not intervene in the judicial process of another sovereign country. This is a matter for Mr. and Mrs. Adam's lawyer. The family should address any complaints that they have about their treatment to the US authorities. They have been provided with the contact details.

Correspondence

Mr. Winnick: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs when the hon. Member for Walsall, North will receive a reply to his letter of 27 April, ref. GU10051886. [86401]

Mr. Hoon: My noble Friend the Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs wrote to my hon. Friend today.

MOX Fuel Shipments

Mr. Brake: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what representations have been made to him by Caribbean states over the proposed shipment of MOX fuel to Japan. [86739]

Mr. Hoon: I am aware of the interest of Caribbean states on this issue, which the Government take very seriously.

I have received a letter from the High Commissioner of the Bahamas on behalf of his Commonwealth Caribbean colleagues requesting a meeting to discuss this issue. Arrangements are in hand to hold such a meeting.

China

Ann Clwyd: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will list the membership and functions of the United Kingdom/China Forum. [85835]

Mr. Hoon: The UK/China Forum is a non-governmental organisation of senior British and Chinese individuals from the worlds of politics, business, administration, academia, the media and the arts, whose purpose is to promote contacts at all levels between Britain and China and develop initiatives to build stronger links in areas where better contact will bring mutual benefit to both sides. The Forum will meet yearly.

The British members of the Forum are:

Right hon. Michael Heseltine PC MP, Chairman; Dr. Chris Gamble (Director, Royal Institute of International Affairs), Executive Chair; Professor David Wall (Head, Asia Programme, Royal Institute of International Affairs), Secretary General; Mr. David Brewer (Chairman, Great Britain China Centre and Chairman, British Invisibles); Sir Charles Powell (President, China Britain Business Council); Sir Len Appleyard (Vice Chairman, Barclays Capital); Mr. Martin Broughton (Chairman, Chatham House China Task Force); Mr. Ben Chapman MP (Chairman, All-Party Parliamentary Group on China); Sir William Purves; Sir Patrick Gillam (Chairman, Standard Chartered Bank); Mr. Bob Mendelsohn (Group Chief Executive, Royal and Sun Alliance); Mr. Win Bischoff (Chairman, J. H. Schroder and Co. Ltd.); Sir John Jennings; Sir Ralph Robins (Chairman, Rolls Royce); Mr. Niall Fitzgerald (Chairman, Unilever); Mr. David John (Chairman, BOC); Baroness Kennedy (Chair, British Council); Lord Puttnam (Chairman, Enigma Productions); Sir Crispin Tickell; Mr. Giles Henderson (Senior Partner, Slaughter and May) and Mr. Richard Lambert (Editor, Financial Times).

The Chinese members of the Forum are:

Mr. Song Jian (Vice Chairman, Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference), Chairman; Mr. Mei Zhaorong (President, People's Institute of Foreign Affairs), Executive Chairman; Mr. Xin Futan (Vice President, People's Institute of Foreign Affairs), Secretary General; Mr. Yao Zhenyan (Chairman, China-UK Group, National People's Congress); Mr. Qu Geping (Chairman, Environmental Protection Committee, National People's Congress); Mr. Xie Anshan (Member, National People's Congress Standing Committee and Legal Committee); Mr. Chen Yuan (Governor, State Development Bank); Mr. Wang Xuebing (Governor, Bank of China); Mr. Wu Chunhe (Editor-in-Chief, Economic Daily); Mr. Wang Jiming (Vice President, China Petrochemical Group); Mr. Tu Guangshao (General Manager, Shanghai Stock Exchange); Mr. Chen Zhongbiao (Chairman, China Overseas Shipping Company Group); Mr. Feng Xiaozeng (Vice Chairman, State Insurance Regulatory Committee); Mr. An Chengxin (Vice President, Chinese Council for the Promotion of International Trade); Mr. Yao Jinrong (Deputy General Manager, China International Trust and Investment Corporation); Mr. Zhang Yanzhong (Deputy General Manager, China Aviation Industry Corporation); Mr. Wang Ren (Vice President, China Academy of Agriculture); Mr. Lin Jintong (President, Beijing Post and Telecommunications University); Mr. Wang Xuan (President, Research Institute of Founder Group of Peking University); Mr. Yang Qixian (Vice President, China Society of Economic Reform) and Mr. Li Gang (Director-General, Liaison Department, Ministry of Culture).

Ambassadors (Engineering Qualifications)

Mrs. Curtis-Thomas: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what steps his Department is taking to encourage men and women with engineering qualifications to enter the Diplomatic Service. [86163]

Mr. Tony Lloyd: The FCO encourages a diverse range of candidates to apply to join the Diplomatic Service, so that the FCO is representative of the best of modern Britain. Applicants can have degrees in any discipline, so men and women with engineering degrees are encouraged

to apply. We aim to visit each UK University every 4 to 5 years, which brings us into contact with graduates studying the whole spectrum of subjects, including engineering.

Mrs. Curtis-Thomas: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs how many ambassadors are chartered engineers. [86162]

Mr. Tony Lloyd: The Senior Management Structure of the Foreign and Commonwealth Office includes one officer who has qualified as a Chartered Engineer. No current Ambassador has this qualification.

Provisional Agendas (European Councils)

Mr. Maclean: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will account for the delay in replying to the questions from the right hon. Member for Penrith and The Border, 19 May 1999, *Official Report*, columns *349–50*, [84699 and 84697]; and if a provisional agenda was available at the time of the holding answers. [85631]

Ms Quin: Holding replies were given to these questions as the Minister was overseas. The substantive answers were given the following day.

WALES

Departmental Expenditure

Ms Lawrence: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales what [illegible]he is proposing to make to the Departmental Expenditure Limit for the Welsh Office and the Office of Her Majesty's Chief Inspector of Schools in Wales for the current financial year. [87029]

Mr. Michael: Subject to Parliament's approval of the related Revised Estimate, the Welsh Office Departmental Expenditure Limit for 1999–2000 will be increased by £30,800,000 from £7,061,717,000 to £7,092,517,000, including a transfer from the Department for Education and Employment Class I, Vote 1 to take account of the change to student support arrangements following the Dearing Review of higher education.

The increase will be offset by a transfer and will not add to the overall level of planned total public expenditure.

SCOTLAND

Fishing

Mr. Kirkwood: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland what consultations were undertaken with fishing organisations in advance of the Scottish Adjacent Waters Boundaries Order 1999. [85527]

Mr. Macdonald: A press release was issued at the time the draft order was laid, on 8 March 1999. All fishing organisations were therefore able to comment on the draft Order between that date and the Order being approved by the Privy Council on 13 April 1999. None did so.

Mr. Kirkwood: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland what rights in respect of consultation are available to Scottish fishermen operating in the areas of sea, responsibility for which is transferred by the Scottish Adjacent Water Boundaries Order 1999 with regard to oil, gas and other subsea operations. [85531]

Mr. Macdonald: Under the Petroleum Act 1998, the Department of Trade and Industry is required in considering various oil and gas activities to have regard to the implications for other users of the sea including the fishing industry. Historically there has been appropriate consultation with representatives of the Scottish fishing industry through the Scottish Office. These consultation arrangements will continue through the Scottish Executive.

Mr. Kirkwood: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland if he will make a statement on the impact on activities of the Scottish Fisheries Protection Agency of the Scottish Adjacent Waters Boundaries Order 1999. [85529]

Mr. Macdonald: Officers of the Scottish Fisheries Protection Agency (SFPA) remain British Sea Fisheries Officers and, as such, will be empowered to operate anywhere within British fisheries limits. In practice, SFPA vessels will patrol down to the new median line, but they will have powers of pursuit outwith the Scottish zone.

Mr. Kirkwood: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland if he will set out the reallocation of responsibilities between the United Kingdom Parliament and the Scottish Parliament as a result of the Scottish Adjacent Water Boundaries Order 1999. [85528]

Mr. Macdonald: The Order makes statutory provision for the first time for a Scottish zone of British fisheries limits. By doing so it helps define the functions of Scottish Ministers and the responsibilities of the Scottish Parliament. Responsibility for the regulation of sea fisheries issues, including measures implemented under the Common Fisheries Policy (CFP), will be devolved to the new Scottish Parliament within the zone, and in respect of Scottish boats outwith the zone.

Mr. Kirkwood: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland if he will make a statement setting out the effects on the jurisdiction of the Scottish courts for waters in the area of sea transferred by the Scottish Adjacent Water Boundaries Order 1999. [85530]

Mr. Macdonald: It remains possible for prosecutions for most alleged offences to be taken anywhere in the UK. The current practice is normally to refer the prosecution case folder to the nearest court to where the offence took place. This is likely to continue to be the case.

Departmental Expenditure

Mr. Jim Murphy: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland what plans he has to amend the Office of the Secretary of State for Scotland and transfers to the Scottish consolidated fund departmental expenditure limits/running costs provision for 1999–2000. [87024]

Dr. Reid: Subject to Parliamentary approval of the necessary Revised Estimates, the gross running costs provision for Class XIII, Vote 1 will be increased by £175,000 from £2,400,000 to £2,575,000. The increase is in respect of an increase in appropriations in aid from: VAT recoveries, fees and costs for legal work done by solicitors and receipts of rents and a transfer of £55,000 from Current Grants for the cost of Private Legislation

Procedure. The running costs limit and the Departmental Expenditure Limit will be increased by £55,000 from £2,400,000 to £2,455,000. This will be offset by a corresponding reduction in expenditure by the Scottish Parliament within the Departmental Expenditure Limit from £13,807,018,000 to £13,806,963,000.

INTERNATIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Balkans (Reconstruction)

Mr. Streeter: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development what European Union support is being given for longer-term reconstruction in the Balkans; and if she will make a statement. [86478]

Clare Short: The EU has provided 4,185 million euros for the reconstruction of the region since the end of the Bosnian conflict. In 1999, 170 million euros were allocated for the reconstruction of the countries of the former Yugoslavia.

The EU is reviewing its plans to take into account the consequences of the Kosovo crisis. The proposed Stability Pact for South East Europe will provide a framework for the regeneration of the Balkan region. The EU will play a key role in this process and in the financing of the international reconstruction effort in Kosovo.

Tobacco

Jackie Ballard: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development how much British aid money has been invested in agricultural projects in developing countries which include the growing of tobacco crops for each year over the last five years. [86212]

Clare Short: Our policy is that development funds must not be used for any purpose which supports the tobacco sector. In line with this requirement, no British development money has been invested in bilateral projects which include the growing of tobacco crops in developing countries in any of the past 5 years.

Aid: GNP Ratio

Mr. Ben Chapman: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development what official development assistance was provided by the UK in 1998 as a percentage of GNP; and what the performance was of other members of OECD's Development Assistance Committee. [86981]

Clare Short: As announced yesterday by the Development Assistance Committee of the OECD, the UK's expenditure on official development assistance (ODA) in 1998 is estimated at £2,315 million, representing 0.27 per cent. of GNP. This is an increase on the 1997 figure of 0.26 per cent. and reflects the Government's commitment to reverse the decline in UK development assistance. The average ODA/GNP ration for all OECD DAC Member Countries was 0.23 per cent. We will continue our strenuous efforts to also improve the effectiveness of international development programmes.

The figures exclude financial flows to countries in transition in Central and Eastern Europe and more advanced developing countries as defined in the DAC List of Aid Recipients.

HEALTH

Guild Community Trust, Preston

Mr. Jack: To ask the Secretary of State for Health (1) what discussions he has had with the North West Regional Health Authority on the appointment of independent investigators to report on administration of the Guild Community Trust Preston during 1998 and 1999; and if he will make a statement; [85139]

(2) in what ways he involved the Chairman of the North West Regional Health Authority in seeking the resignations of the non-executive directors of the Guild Community Trust Preston; [85224]

(3) if he will list the grounds on which he dismissed the Board of the Guild Community Trust Preston; [85223]

(4) if he will list those occasions on which the non-executive directors of the Guild Community Trust Preston sought advice on the way the trust was being run from the North West Regional Health Authority; and what advice was given; [85136]

(5) if he will publish the correspondence between his Department, the North West Regional Health Authority and the Chief Executive of the Guild Community Trust Preston during 1998 and 1999 on the Chief Executive's administration of the trust during this period; [85137]

(6) if he will list the *(a)* meetings and *(b)* communications between his Department and the Chief Executive of the Guild Community Trust Preston during 1998 and 1999 and state the reasons for each of those meetings and communications; [85138]

(7) what reports his Department has received on the administration of the Guild Community Trust Preston in its last two years; and what were their conclusions. [85140]

Mr. Denham *[holding answer 25 May 1999]:* A mental health report which appeared in the summer of 1998 raised concerns about the management of Guild Community Healthcare NHS Trust and, specifically, its Chief Executive. The Trust Board, after consultation with the NHS Executive North West, took the decision to suspend the Chief Executive and commission an independent panel to investigate his management style.

The independent Galbraith Report was presented to the non-executive team in December 1998. It concluded that there had been a clear and significant loss of confidence in the trust's Chief Executive and that his position had become untenable. Then the Chairman of the Trust resigned. I have received briefings from the North West Regional Office of the NHS about the investigation which was commissioned by, and reported to, the Guild Trust Board.

The circumstances at the Guild Trust, Preston were the subject of letters, e-mails, telephone and face-to-face conversations involving non-executive directors of the trust, officials at the NHS North West Regional Office and officials in my Department over a lengthy period.

In May the non-executive directors of the Guild Trust were asked to resign in the best interests of the NHS and the staff and patients of the trust because there had been an irreversible breakdown in relations with one another. Two agreed to resign and I dismissed the three who refused.

The Chairman of the North West Region of the NHS, who is my representative in these matters, was involved at all stages in my consideration of the situation at the Guild Trust and my decision to seek the resignations of the non-executive directors.

The Department, including the NHS Executive North West, communicates on a regular basis with NHS Trusts about management issues. The extent and diversity of these contacts make it impractical to compile a definitive list.

Staffordshire Ambulance Service

Mr. Jenkins: To ask the Secretary of State for Health (1) what steps he is taking to ensure that the impact of the use of computerised systems in respect of call-outs by Staffordshire Ambulance service is disseminated to other ambulance services in the United Kingdom; [85537]

(2) what assessment he has made of the response rate times achieved by Staffordshire Ambulance service. [85536]

Mr. Denham: Staffordshire Ambulance service has reported impressive response times which we commend. Information about its work, including its use of computerised systems, has been widely disseminated through publication of its response times, presentation of its results to Ministers by the chief executive, and at a national meeting of health authority commissioners focusing on its methods.

Other ambulance services in England have adopted the approaches promoted by Staffordshire.

MMR Vaccine

Mr. Llew Smith: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what research has been conducted by, or on behalf of, his Department into the health risks of the use of bovine serum in the manufacture of MMR vaccines. [85534]

Ms Jowell: No research specific to bovine material and measles, mumps and rubella vaccine has been conducted by, or on behalf of, the Department of Health. All bovine blood products used in the manufacture of MMR vaccines comply with European guidelines on minimising the risk of transmitting agents causing spongiform encephalopathies via medicinal products, which address the sourcing and processing of bovine material used in the manufacture of pharmaceuticals. The product used in the manufacture of MMR vaccine is not serum, but bovine albumin. This is not United Kingdom sourced.

Royal Shrewsbury Hospital

Mr. Paul Marsden: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how many patients at the Royal Shrewsbury Hospital were referred for radiotherapy treatment in each year from 1989 to date; and if he will make a statement. [85695]

Mr. Denham: The Department does not collect information about numbers of patients referred for radiotherapy. The following information indicates first out-patient referrals for clinical oncology at Royal Shrewsbury Hospital (only available since 1994–95), a proportion of whom will have been referred for radiotherapy treatment.

Consultant first outpatient attendance

Year	*Seen*	*Did not appear*
1994–95	350	3
1995–96	492	5
1996–97	1,115	27
1997–98	632	21

Mr. Paul Marsden: To ask the Secretary of State for Health (1) when the Royal Shrewsbury Hospital will be informed of the outcome of its bid for a linear accelerator; and if he will make a statement; [85698]

(2) pursuant to the letter of 12 April from the Under-Secretary of State for Health, if his officials have considered the financial terms of funding a second linear accelerator at the Royal Shrewsbury Hospital; and if he will make a statement; [85696]

(3) what reasons underlie the length of time taken by the NHS Executive, West Midlands Regional Office to consider the Royal Shrewsbury Hospital's business case for funding to replace its cobalt unit with a new linear accelerator; and if he will make a statement. [85716]

Mr. Denham: The National Health Service Executive–West Midlands Regional Office is carefully considering the business case and hopes to make a decision as soon as possible. The prime consideration will be establishing a safe and sustainable service. There are several factors underpinning this, and the Regional Office needs to satisfy itself that all the issues have been addressed before approving the business case. In particular, the Royal Shrewsbury Hospital, which is not itself a cancer centre, will need to demonstrate that robust working links have been developed with the North Staffordshire cancer centre. In addition, work currently taking place on developing a national framework for radiotherapy services, as well as wider regional cancer strategy will inform the decision. The Royal Shrewsbury Hospital will be informed as soon as a decision has been reached.

West Midlands Regional Office is currently exploring possible sources of funding to minimise delay should the business case be approved.

Running Costs

Miss Widdecombe: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what is the estimated combined annual running costs in the last financial year of the *(a)* Commission for Health Improvement and *(b)* National Institute for Clinical Excellence; and if he will make a statement. [85737]

Mr. Denham: The Commission for Health Improvement will be established by the Health Bill currently before Parliament, and incurred no running costs in the last financial year. The National Institute for Clinical Excellence was established on 1 April this year and did not incur any running costs in the last financial year.

Viagra

Mr. Keetch: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what the guidelines are for the issue of Viagra on NHS prescription, with particular reference to the general practitioner's discretion. [86301]

Mr. Denham: Subject to Parliamentary approval, from 1 July changes will be incorporated in schedule 11 of the National Health Service (General Medical Services) Regulations 1992 which will specify those categories of patients for whom general practitioners may prescribe drug treatments for impotence, including Viagra, on the NHS.

Asthma

Mr. Oaten: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what data his Department collects on childhood asthma; and if he will set out the figures for the last 10 years. [86407]

Mr. Hutton: There are no comprehensive data on the number of children with asthma. The Department's Central Health Monitoring Unit brought together a broad range of the best statistics on asthma in "Asthma: An Epidemiological Overview" (1995), copies of which are available in the Library. This report quotes an estimate, on the basis of all the information available, that

"the prevalence of asthma sufficiently severe to require regular medical supervision is from 4–6 per cent. in children".

The Department routinely collects data on hospital in-patient care for asthma. The numbers (in thousands) of hospital in-patient cases (ie finished consultant episodes—ordinary admissions and day cases) in which asthma was the main diagnosis (ICD 10 codes J45 and J46 from 1995–96; ICD 9 code 493 before that) in England for the last ten years for which figures are available, among children aged 0 to 4 years and 5 to 14 years, are given in the table:

Age group	*0–4*	*5–14*
1988–89	38.8	23.0
1989–90	32.7	18.8
1990–91	32.3	16.7
1991–92	32.1	18.5
1992–93	31.9	16.2
1993–94	32.5	17.5
1994–95	28.6	14.8
1995–96	28.7	15.2
1996–97	25.7	12.0
1997–98	20.4	12.5

Notes:
1. Figures for 1995–96 and earlier years are grossed for both coverage and unknown/invalid clinical data; 1996–97 and 1997–98 figures are provisional and ungrossed (no adjustments have yet been made for shortfalls in data).
2. A finished consultant episode (FCE) is defined as a period of patient care under the care of an individual consultant within one health care provider. FCE figures do not represent the number of patients as a person may have more than one episode of care during the year.

Source:
Hospital Episodes Statistics (HES), Department of Health

The Department also commissions the annual Health Survey for England, copies of the reports of which are also available in the Library. The surveys for 1995, 1996 and 1997 included questions on asthma. According to the report of the 1997 Survey, 23 per cent. of boys and 18 per cent. of girls aged 2 to 15 years had been diagnosed at some time in the past as suffering from asthma.

Mr. Oaten: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what research his Department has carried out on asthma in young children; and what plans he has for further research. [86406]

Mr. Hutton: The Department, the Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions and the Medical Research Council are jointly funding a major research initiative on the relationship between air pollution and respiratory disease. The National Asthma Campaign is managing, on behalf of the National Health Service Executive, the NHS National research and development programme on asthma management. Many of the research projects commissioned under these initiatives will be pertinent to asthma in children.

The Medical Research Council which receives most of its income via grant-in-aid from the Office of Science and Technology in the Department of Trade and Industry also spends about £2 million a year on research into prevention and treatment of asthma and related areas.

Medical Equipment (Registration)

Mr. Oaten: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what plans his Department has to require health authorities which produce or modify medical equipment to obtain a CE Mark registration before the equipment is issued. [86677]

Ms Jowell: Any health authority which places medical devices on the market must comply with the requirements of the Medical Devices Regulations and CE mark their product accordingly.

Mr. Oaten: To ask the Secretary of State for Health which companies or Government organisations his Department has exempted from the requirement to obtain CE Marks for medical equipment. [86676]

Ms Jowell: None. All manufacturers or other organisations who place medical devices on the United Kingdom market must go through the appropriate conformity assessment procedure detailed in the Medical Devices Regulations and CE mark their products accordingly. Health care establishments who make a device for their own use in-house are not regarded as having placed a product on the market.

Mr. Oaten: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what plans he has to make the list of medical equipment which has obtained a CE Mark available for public inspection. [86674]

Ms Jowell: As required by the Medical Devices Regulations, the Medical Devices Agency maintains a register only of manufacturers of low risk and custom-made devices and assemblers who have a place of business in the United Kingdom. Article 20 of the Medical Devices Directive prevents data on this register being made publicly available.

Mr. Oaten: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what guidance his Department has issued to health authorities about the need to obtain CE Marks for medical equipment. [86675]

Ms Jowell: In January 1998 the National Health Service Executive issued an Executive Letter (EL(98)5) to all health authorities reminding them of their responsibilities under the Medical Devices Regulations. In addition the Medical Devices Agency has produced a Guide for Health Care Professionals on the CE marking of Medical Devices together with a leaflet on the CE mark plus a Bulletin on the application of the Regulations on the activities of health care establishments. Copies of these documents are available in the Library.

Water Fluoridation

Mr. Laurence Robertson: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how many water authorities fluoridate their water; what guidance he gives to water authorities on this practice; what plans he has to change the law regarding water fluoridation; and if he will make a statement. [86411]

Mr. Denham: In England six Water Undertakers provide fluoridated water to some of the populations they serve—Northumbria, North West, Severn Trent, South Staffordshire, Anglian and Thames.

Under the Water Industry Act 1991 health authorities are required to consult:

the appropriate local authorities

the community health councils

and any other local bodies the HA considers appropriate.

In addition the HA must publicise its proposals for water fluoridation through the local press and invite public comment. It is important to ensure that the publicity covers all parts of the area to be fluoridated, and reaches as many people as possible. The HA must allow a period of at least three months for this consultation process before it makes its final decision. Once it has completed consultation and formally adopted a policy in favour of water fluoridation, the HA must then in writing request the water company to implement the scheme.

The Government will make a policy statement on fluoridation in the Public Health White Paper, which will be published shortly.

Beta Interferon

Mr. Laurence Robertson: To ask the Secretary of State for Health when he expects that the National Institute for Clinical Excellence will report to him on the use of beta interferon; and if he will make a statement. [86483]

Mr. Denham: The initial work programme and, therefore, the timing of guidance on any specific procedure for the National Institute for Clinical Excellence has not been finally determined, although it is likely that beta interferon will be referred to NICE.

Homeopathy

Mr. Tredinnick: To ask the Secretary of State for Health (1) what steps are being taken to recognise at consultant level those practitioners with extensive experience in homeopathic medicine gained before 1 January 1997; [86326]

(2) what provision there is for the training of orthodox physicians in their conventional path of accreditation in homeopathy and complementary medicine; [86329]

(3) if homeopathic medicine is recognised as a specialty in the United Kingdom. [86327]

Mr. Denham: There is currently no statutory training path for doctors in homeopathy in the United Kingdom, although consultants in homeopathy have been appointed in the National Health Service. Since 1 January 1997 it has been a requirement to be on the General Medical Council's Specialist Register in order to be eligible for appointment as a substantive NHS consultant. Doctors holding substantive NHS consultant appointments in homeopathy before 31 December 1998 were able to apply for inclusion in the Register under transitional provisions in the European Specialist Medical Qualifications Order 1995 (as amended). New consultants in homeopathy would ordinarily expect to be trained in another medical specialty recognised for the purposes of specialist registration, as well as in the non-statutory requirements for homeopathy.

The requirements for specialist medical education are governed by European Directive 93/16/EEC. The practice of homeopathy varies greatly across the European Economic Area, and there is no provision within the Directive to recognise homeopathy for the purposes of medical training. The Faculty of Homeopathy has previously indicated its intention to develop a nationally recognised training programme in homeopathy. In order to do so, the Faculty would need to satisfy the Specialist Training Authority of the Medical Royal Colleges (STA) that the training programme met the requirements of Directive 93/16/EEC. It would then be for the STA to apply to the Secretary of State for Health for inclusion of the specialty in the European Specialist Medical Qualifications Order 1995 (as amended).

HOME DEPARTMENT

Correspondence

Mr. Kaufman: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department when he intends to reply to the letters dated 19 March, 23 March and 22 April from the right hon. Member for Manchester, Gorton with regard to Mr. H. Eljack, 5 Oundle Close. [86409]

Mr. Straw: I wrote to my right hon. Friend, on 10 June 1999.

Mr. Winnick: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department when the hon. Member for Walsall, North will receive a reply to his letter of 27 April, ref. 7518/99. [86400]

Mr. Mike O'Brien: I am sorry that my hon. Friend has not yet received a reply to his letter of 27 April. I will be replying shortly setting out the full background to this case.

Ford Open Prison

Mr. Gordon Prentice: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what criteria are used to decide which prisoners should serve their sentence in Ford Open Prison. [86711]

Mr. George Howarth: Ford prison is an open prison and accepts adult male category D prisoners. The current arrangements for the categorisation and allocation of adult male prisoners are set out in chapter 7 of Prison Service Order 2200, a copy of which is available in the Library.

Allocation criteria for individual establishments are agreed between the area manager and the governor of the prison. They vary according to local circumstances. The criteria for acceptance at Ford prison are listed as follows:

There is no maximum sentence length, but prisoners must be within three years of their parole eligibility date;

prisoners serving a sentence for a sex offence or an offence of arson will not be accepted;

prisoners serving sentences for violent offences will be accepted only on progressive moves from closed establishments, and where their conduct during their sentence has indicated their suitability;

prisoners should have no history of escape or abscond, and no failure on temporary release in the previous three years; and

prisoners will not be accepted if they require full time medical care. They should be fit for most forms of work.

Domestic Violence

Mr. Cohen: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what assessment he has made of the impact that advertisements implying a pleasure for women in male roughness have on his efforts to avert domestic violence; and if he will make a statement. [86477]

Mr. Boateng: No such assessment has been made but nobody should believe that violence against women is either acceptable or enjoyed by the victims. There can be no excuse for such conduct. It is so serious because it is so often committed in what should be the "safety" of the victim's home, even in front of children, by a partner to whom the victim should be able to look for support and protection.

The "Break the Chain" campaign launched this year made clear the Government's determination to tackle domestic violence. The leaflet has been so much in demand that we are having to reprint it as a matter of urgency.

Senator Pinochet

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department, pursuant to his answer of 9 February 1999, *Official Report*, column *144*, to the hon. Member for Chesham and Amersham (Mrs. Gillan), what was the role of the fourth officer at the arrest of Senator Pinochet. [86752]

Mr. Straw: As indicated in the my reply of 9 February 1999 to the hon. Member for Chesham and Amersham (Mrs. Gillan), *Official Report*, column *144*, only two officers were present. They were the head of the Metropolitan Police Extradition Squad and another member of the Squad.

999 Calls

Mr. Dismore: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many 999 calls were received in each of the last three years by *(a)* police forces and *(b)* the Metropolitan Police; and if he will make a statement. [86653]

Mr. Boateng: I refer my hon. Friend to the reply I gave the right hon. Member for Berwick-upon-Tweed (Mr. Beith) on 19 March 1999, *Official Report*, columns *824–26*.

Targeted Policing Bids

Mr. Beith: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will list those areas which *(a)* have successfully bid for additional funding for the targeted policing initiative, and how much has been allocated in each case and *(b)* submitted unsuccessful bids; and if he will make a statement. [86124]

Mr. Boateng: Of the £250 million three year Crime Reduction Programme which we announced on 21 July 1998, £32 million has been earmarked for the targeted policing initiative. The aim of this initiative is to help police forces, in collaboration with local crime and disorder partnerships, to improve the way in which they tackle crime. Rather than only responding to crime and dealing with its immediate consequences, the challenge is to reduce it by analysing the real crime problem and tackling its underlying causes. To this end we will be funding some 20 developmental projects over the next three years with an emphasis on developing and testing our new, effective and cost effective targeted policing tactics.

On 11 November last year, we wrote to all chief constables in England and Wales, copied to police authorities and local authority Chief Executives, inviting them to submit proposals under the first of two competitions in the targeted policing initiative. A total of 32 police forces submitted 73 outline proposals for funding a range of targeted policing initiatives in their areas. The bids contained a good mix of problems to be tackled and possible approaches to tackling them.

The proposals were assessed against the published criteria by a specially convened panel comprising representatives from the Home Office, the Association of Chief Police Officers, Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Constabulary and the Local Government Association. The panel identified 11 proposals (table 1) as strong contenders for further development and which are currently undergoing validation and development with the help of independent consultants appointed by the Home Office. The development of the proposals is due to be completed shortly and I expect to be able to announce the final results by the end of June.

The shortlisted proposals have an estimated bid cost to the crime reduction programme of £5.2 million, however the final allocation of funding will not be known until the development work is completed.

The 62 bids not selected for further development at this stage are shown in table 2. Of these, four have been designated by the assessment panel as reserve projects in case any of the 11 projects are not selected.

Table 1: Crime reduction programme—Targeted policing initiative—Phase 1
Recommended Projects

£000

Partners:	Police	Region	Topic	Bid from CRP	Resources levered in
1 Rhondda Cynon Taff CBC	South Wales	Wales	Partnership strategy to reduce crime and disorder problems associated with childrens homes	500	575
2 Cardiff CC/Bro Taf Health Authority	South Wales	Wales	Reduction of street violence within the City of Cardiff	498	305
3 Kingston-upon-Hull CC	Humberside	York	Reduction of anti-social behaviour and low level criminal behaviour	406	361
4 Calderdale MBC and Community Safety Partnership	West Yorkshire	York	Reduction of vehicle crime	138	475
5 Stoke-on-Trent UA/Community Safety Partnership	Staffordshire	W Mid	Reduction of acquisitive crime	412	645
6. Islington/Camden/Southwark Councils	Metropolitan	London	Reducing youth disorder and auto crime in the boroughs	542	967
7 Greenwich/Merton/Tower Hamlets/Hounslow	Metropolitan	London	Reduction on racially motivated crime	1,002	8,000
8 Hackney	Metropolitan	London	Reducing 'hot spots' in the borough generated by use of crack cocaine	760	1,380
9 Tyndale DC and Parish Councils	Northumbria	NE	Tackling crime and disorder in rural locations	40	240
10 Medway Council	Kent	SE	Reduction of acquisitive crime by disruption of market	450	50
11 Stockport MDC	GMP	NW	Reduction of acquisitive crime by disruption of marketing using Crackdown Consolidation Cycle technique	445	447
				5,193	13,445

Table 2: Crime reduction programme—Targeted policing initiative—Phase 1
Reserve projects

£000

Partners:	Police	Region	Topic	Bid from CRP	Resources levered in
Reading BC	Thames Valley	SE	Youth crime, disorder, and educational disruption in South Reading	544	0
Wide range of linked agencies	Dyfed-Powys	Welsh	Using Automatic Number Plate Recognition cameras to target police resources against travelling criminals and drug dealers	789	736
Luton BC/Safer Luton Partnership	Bedfordshire	East	Reduction of vehicle crime and associated issues	469	1,272
Leeds CC and Community Safety Partnership	West Yorkshire	York	Multi Agency approach to areas of high victimisation	570	726
				2,372	2,734

Table 2: Crime reduction programme—Targeted policing initiative—Phase 1
Non-selected proposals

Partners	Police	Area	Region
British CC and Chamber of Commerce	Avon and Somerset	Bristol N, S and Central	SW
British City Council	Avon and Somerset	Bristol N, S and Central	SW
Luton BC	Bedfordshire	Luton	East
Warrington BC and others	Cheshire	Warrington	NW
Redcar/Cleveland	Cleveland	Cleveland Police force	NE
Cumbria CC and local	Cumbria	Cumbrian Police force area	NW
Derby CC/Other local	Derbyshire	Derby Division	E Mid
Devon CC Cornwall CC	Devon and Cornwall	Devon/Cornwall Police	SW
Poole Borough and County	Dorset	Poole	SW
DCs of Wear Valley	Durham	Wear and Tees Division	NE

Table 2: Crime reduction programme—Targeted policing initiative—Phase 1
Non-selected proposals

Partners	*Police*	*Area*	*Region*
DCs of Durham	Durham	Durham Police force area	NE
Force Area Agencies	Dyfed-Powys	Force Area	Wales
Manchester CC	Greater Manchester	N and S Manchester	NW
Portsmouth City Council	Hampshire	Portsmouth South	SE
St. Albans CC/Herts CC	Hertfordshire	St. Albans	East
Herts CC Herts Probation	Hertfordshire	Hertfordshire Police force	East
S. Humber	Humberside	Scunthorpe	York
NE Lincolnshire Council	Humberside	Grimsby, Cleethorpes	York
Kingston-upon-Hull CC	Humberside	Kingston-upon-Hull	York
Kent CC/Youth Services	Kent	West Kent	SE
Kent CC/Thanet DC	Kent	Thanet	SE
Kent CC/Canterbury	Kent	Canterbury	SE
Thanet DC/Canterbury	Kent	Canterbury/Thanet	SE
Blackburn BC	Lancashire	Blackburn with Darwen	NW
Blackpool BC	Lancashire	Blackpool Town Centre	NW
Lancaster CC/Lancashire	Lancashire	Lancaster	NW
Lancashire CC/other	Lancashire	Pennine Police Division	NW
Leicester City Council	Leicestershire	Areas of Leicester	E Mid
Liverpool City Council	Merseyside	Liverpool	NW
St. Helens	Merseyside	St. Helens	NW
St. Helens	Merseyside	St. Helens	NW
Lewisham/Redbridge	Metropolitan	LBs of Lewisham	London
York CC and Uni; Safer	North Yorkshire	City of York	York
York CC LEA; Safer York	North Yorkshire	City of York	York
Sunderland City Council	Northumbria	Sunderland City	NE
N Tyneside Council	Northumbria	North Tyneside	NE
Gateshead MBC	Northumbria	Gateshead West	NE
S Tyneside Community	Northumbria	South Tyneside Area	NE
Gateshead MBC	Northumbria	Gateshead East	NE
Notts CC and local	Nottinghamshire	Nottinghamshire Police	E Mid
Local County and Borough	South Wales	S Wales Police force area	Welsh
Barnsley MBC/Chamber	South Yorkshire	S Yorkshire Police force	York
Rotherham MBC, Youth	South Yorkshire	Rotherham East and West	York
E Staffs BC, Prob Ser	Staffordshire	Burton upon Trent	W Mid
Surrey CC/Surrey Health	Surrey	Guildford/Waverley/East	SE
Various Sussex	Sussex	Eastbourne	SE
Reading BC	Thames Valley	Reading	SE
Aylesbury DC/Bucks CC	Thames Valley	Aylesbury	SE
Wycombe/Chiltern	Thames Valley	Chiltern Vale	SE
W Berkshire Council	Thames Valley	Newbury	SE
Slough BC	Thames Valley	Slough	SE
Members of local	Warwickshire	Warwickshire Police force	W Mid
Stratford-upon-Avon	Warwickshire	Stratford-upon-Avon	W Mid
Nuneaton BC/N	Warwickshire	Northern Area Command	W Mid
Warwick District Safety	Warwickshire	N and S Warwick	W Mid
Wychavon/Worcester	West Mercia	Worcester	WM
Birmingham City Council	West Midlands	Birmingham	W Mid
Sandwell MBC/Safer	West Midlands	Sandwell	WM
Birmingham LA, LEA	West Midlands	SW Birmingham	W Mid
Leeds City Council	West Yorkshire	Leeds	York
City of Bradford MDC	West Yorkshire	Bradford City Centre	York
Kirklees MC	West Yorkshire	Huddersfield/Dewsbury	York

Defendants

Mr. Beith: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many, and what percentage of, criminal prosecutions were completed in *(a)* magistrates' courts, and *(b)* higher courts, in each of the last five years for which figures are available; and if he will make a statement. [86122]

Mr. Boateng: Information taken from the Home Office Court Proceedings Database is given in the table.

Number and percentage[1] of defendants proceeded against for all offences where case was completed by type of court, England and Wales, 1993–97

Thousand and percentage

Year	*Defendants where proceedings completed in magistrates' courts[2]*	*Defendants tried in the Crown Court*
1993		
Number	1,870.3	83.1
Percentage	96	4

Number and percentage[1] of defendants proceeded against for all offences where case was completed by type of court, England and Wales, 1993–97

Thousand and percentage

Year	Defendants where proceedings completed in magistrates' courts[2]	Defendants tried in the Crown Court
1994		
Number	1,858.5	85.9
Percentage	96	4
1995		
Number	1,757.3	89.0
Percentage	95	5
1996		
Number	1,838.2	85.9
Percentage	96	4
1997		
Number	1,767.7	91.3
Percentage	95	5

[1] Rates as a proportion of those cases completed at both magistrates' courts and the Crown Court.

[2] Excluding defendants committed for trial.

Mr. Clappison: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many indictable offences have been dealt with by either magistrates courts or the Crown Court serving *(a)* Croydon, *(b)* Gloucester and *(c)* Liverpool since 30 September 1998. [85763]

Mr. Boateng: Information taken from the Home Office Court Proceedings Database is given in the tables.

Table A: Number of defendants proceeded against for indictable offences at Croydon, Gloucester and Liverpool magistrates' courts, October-December 1998[1]

Magistrates' courts	Number proceeded against
(a) Croydon	728
(b) Gloucester	413
(c) Liverpool	1,912

Table B: Number of defendants tried for indictable offences at Croydon, Gloucester and Liverpool Crown Court Centres, October-December 1998[1], January-March 1999[1]

Crown Court Centres	Period	Total tried
(a) Croydon	October-December 1998	315
	January-March 1999	309
(b) Gloucester	October-December 1998	78
	January-March 1999	92
(c) Liverpool	October-December 1998	831
	January-March 1999	783

[1] Provisional

Mr. Clappison: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many offenders have been convicted of offences involving the supply or possession of drugs in either the magistrates court or the relevant Crown Court serving *(a)* Liverpool, *(b)* Croydon and *(c)* Gloucester since 30 September 1998. [85768]

Mr. Boateng: Information taken from the Home Office Court Proceedings Database is given in the table.

Number of persons convicted of offences involving the supply or possession of drugs at (a) Liverpool, (b) Croydon and (c) Gloucester magistrates' courts and Crown Court Centres by type of offence, October-December 1998[1], January-March 1999[1]

Court	Period	Possession of a controlled drug	Supply of a controlled drug	Possession with intent to supply a controlled drug
Magistrates' courts				
(a) Liverpool	October-December 1998	240	18	27
(b) Croydon	October-December 1998	78	2	8
(c) Gloucester	October-December 1998	28	1	2
Crown Court				
(a) Liverpool	October-December 1998	22	26	28
	January-March 1999	18	44	28
(b) Croydon	October-December 1998	5	6	15
	January-March 1999	5	12	18
(c) Gloucester	October-December 1998	—	—	4
	January-March 1999	2	1	2

[1] Provisional

DNA Samples

Mr. Beith: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many DNA samples have been taken of people *(a)* charged and *(b)* cautioned, in each police area and in total in each of the last five years; and if he will make a statement. [86125]

Mr. Boateng: The annual totals (Table A) are based upon the information submitted with each DNA sample sent by individual police forces to the Forensic Science Service. The information shows whether someone has been "cautioned" or "not cautioned". The term "not cautioned" can mean the individual has been suspected, convicted, charged or informed that he will be reported for a recordable offence. It is, therefore, not possible to provide precise figures for *(a)*.

The cumulative totals for the past five years (Table B) are based upon the number of samples received by the Forensic Science Service from each force. As neither individual forces nor the Association of Chief Police Officers retain information about the number of samples actually taken, the information in the table is the most reliable indicator available of the number taken and submitted to the Forensic Science Service for analysis. The cumulative totals in (Table B) cover the period to March 1999 only and therefore, differ slightly from those in (Table A) which include additional months.

Table A: Samples submitted annually by police forces—1995 to 1999

Force	Samples per year First columns relates to 'cautioned', second to 'not cautioned' 1995		1996		1997		1998		1999	
Avon and Somerset	22	1,728	83	1,957	409	3,587	679	5,500	323	2,536
Bedfordshire	3	1,042	24	912	124	1,116	0	11	2	0
Cambridgeshire	12	1,540	30	1,890	163	1,895	314	1,873	111	1,604
Cheshire	5	955	54	2,986	196	2,735	195	1,570	1	0
Cleveland	61	1,929	75	1,757	123	1,664	181	1,093	37	449
Cumbria	2	415	19	790	76	1,250	218	2,208	60	719
Derbyshire	11	4,240	24	3,824	390	3,681	498	4,131	195	1,482
Devon and Cornwall	73	2,676	41	3,125	636	3,442	608	3,667	322	1,676
Dorset	0	671	9	724	23	795	30	831	14	265
Durham	13	1,232	13	1,110	224	2,495	646	3,259	11	177
Dyfed-Powys	41	1,860	9	2,407	168	2,604	409	2,190	114	819
Essex	8	2,461	20	2,265	565	3,946	758	4,053	279	1,452
Gloucestershire	1	885	1	861	50	1,024	210	1,484	113	542
GMP	58	2,179	335	8,303	712	7,701	293	1,727	0	7
Gwent	4	1,819	8	2,321	116	2,528	368	1,886	140	715
Hampshire	4	2,837	8	3,454	122	4,320	355	4,155	157	1,426
Hertfordshire	42	1,121	73	1,128	52	1,227	85	1,252	27	429
Humberside	7	1,262	310	6,237	1,919	8,313	2,230	5,466	716	1,828
Kent	12	2,363	95	3,161	351	2,807	1	12	0	3
Lancashire	100	3,256	242	5,289	366	4,462	195	2,069	1	6
Leicestershire	3	1,818	19	2,359	70	2,417	184	2,701	140	1,101
Lincolnshire	0	418	6	1,404	23	1,583	44	1,464	29	456
Metropolitan	80	15,796	133	16,387	1,070	19,456	5,952	29,152	2,520	11,809
City of London	297	1,467	400	1,647	710	1,437	633	1,280	232	505
Mersey	1	2,959	59	4,324	109	2,411	446	5,624	164	2,153
Norfolk	15	1,010	59	3,504	475	4,081	1,069	3,791	511	1,604
Northamptonshire	1	1,627	0	1,776	170	2,689	269	2,558	117	748
Northumbria	2	3,321	143	5,701	223	3,361	338	3,533	135	1,469
North Wales	8	1,751	1	1,936	110	1,979	509	2,484	197	989
North Yorkshire	29	1,335	16	1,535	50	1,674	112	1,539	31	643
Nottinghamshire	3	399	18	1,423	268	3,976	25	367	0	5
South Wales	9	5,988	238	8,222	769	6,927	130	1,538	17	191
South Yorkshire	4	2,841	11	2,894	374	5,833	2,582	9,440	194	1,177
Staffordshire	0	1,196	2	1,048	71	1,868	1,091	7,484	512	3,294
Suffolk	2	20	43	966	181	1,657	67	495	0	2
Surrey	4	556	2	674	68	1,783	76	1,379	12	279
Sussex	14	2,613	29	2,644	93	1,898	93	1,119	84	689
Thames Valley	18	2,758	52	3,045	81	2,467	197	2,106	272	1,428
Warwickshire	0	431	0	488	71	849	130	1,043	42	352
West Mercia	25	2,313	23	1,907	82	1,807	194	1,849	110	855
West Midlands	36	2,760	770	7,258	1,208	10,266	2,746	13,155	1,333	5,242
West Yorkshire	66	5,662	188	7,389	782	8,534	1,286	9,191	363	3,143
Wiltshire	1	1,271	4	1,145	17	1,401	27	786	0	1

Table B: Cumulative figures by police force—April 1995 to March 1999

Force	Number of samples received
Avon and Somerset	15,854
Bedfordshire	3,279
Cambridgeshire	8,179
Cheshire	8,789
Cleveland	7,079
Cumbria	5,382
Derbyshire	17,842
Devon and Cornwall	15,563
Dorset	3,254
Durham	9,195
Dyfed-Powys	10,361
Essex	14,986
Gloucestershire	4,855
GMP	21,360
Gwent	9,657
Hampshire	16,298
Hertfordshire	5,264
Humberside	27,289
Kent	8,967
Lancashire	15,997
Leicestershire	10,372
Lincolnshire	5,252

Table B: Cumulative figures by police force—April 1995 to March 1999

Force	Number of samples received
Metropolitan	96,388
City of London	8,334
Mersey	17,320
Norfolk	15,432
Northampshire	9,670
Northumbria	17,660
North Wales	9,446
North Yorks	6,753
Nottinghamshire	6,652
South Wales	24,153
South Yorkshire	25,392
Staffordshire	14,731
Suffolk	3,438
Surrey	4,729
Sussex	9,034
Thames Valley	11,743
Warwickshire	3,249
West Mercia	8,788
West Midlands	41,970
West Yorkshire	35,241
Wiltshire	4,662

Police Vehicles

Dr. Cable: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what research his Department has *(a)* commissioned and *(b)* evaluated on the need for and use of rapid response by police vehicles. [86200]

Mr. Boateng: No research on this precise subject has been commissioned. The only recent research in this area of police work was conducted by the Home Office Police Research Group who published in 1997 the results of a study of deaths and serious injuries resulting from police vehicle accidents. It found that three police activities accounted for 88 per cent. of fatal accidents—45 per cent. were during pursuit/follow situations; 23 per cent. arose during responses to emergency calls and 20 per cent. were routine patrol cases. This research was used by the Association of Chief Police Officers (ACPO) in its recent report and recommendations on police pursuit training.

Dr. Cable: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what were the average response times of police cars to emergency calls in the last year for which figures are available. [86201]

Mr. Boateng: The information requested is not available centrally, but in 1997–98, in England and Wales, 88 per cent. of police immediate responses to incidents were within the targets set by forces.

Dr. Cable: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what are the rules governing blue light police car responses. [86202]

Mr. Boateng: This is an operational matter for chief officers of police. There is a nationally agreed Association of Chief Police Officers (ACPO) Pursuit Code of Practice and work is going forward to implement recommendations from the recent ACPO report on police pursuit driver training. One of the recommendations in the ACPO report is that all police vehicles that engage in pursuits and emergency response should be equipped with both sirens and emergency blue lights. Such equipment should be used in all but exceptional circumstances. It is already policy to consider continuously the consequences of a pursuit and whether to break it off.

National Identification Service

Dr. Cable: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what assessment he has made of the current applications process for police checks in the National Identification Service; and if he will make a statement. [86199]

Kate Hoey: The Metropolitan Police Service's Character Enquiries section, which is based in the National Identification Service, carries out pre-employment vetting checks in accordance with administrative arrangements agreed between the Home Office and the Association of Chief Police Officers (ACPO). New arrangements for criminal record checks, which will address the limitations of the current system, were included in Part V of the Police Act 1997. The various checks provided for in the Act will be undertaken by the new Criminal Records Bureau which is in the process of being established.

Nottingham Prison

Mr. Clappison: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department, pursuant to his answer of 25 May 1999, *Official Report*, column *80*, what factors underlay his decision to select Nottingham Prison for the location of accommodation for offenders previously convicted of offences against children; and what other prisons were considered. [85906]

Mr. Boateng *[holding answer 8 June 1999]:* A wide range of factors were taken into account when considering the suitability of Her Majesty's Prison Nottingham for housing offenders and ex-offenders, including the need to ensure easy access to high quality local services such as the regular presence of experienced Probation and Social Services staff and a police force which is able to respond quickly and effectively. Such services are most easily available in towns and cities.

In considering which prison would be appropriate, options across the prison estate were taken into account.

Mr. Clappison: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what plans he has further to publicise the decision to accommodate offenders previously convicted of offences involving children in Nottingham Prison. [86103]

Mr. Boateng: Consultation with the relevant local agencies and interested people continues. My right hon. and noble Friend Lord Williams will be meeting representatives from Nottingham on Monday 14 June 1999.

Mr. Clappison: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what consultations *(a)* he has carried out and *(b)* he proposes to carry out concerning his plan to accommodate offenders previously convicted of offences involving children in Nottingham Prison. [86104]

Mr. Boateng: The responsibility for managing the risk that ex-offenders present lies with local agencies. The plans in respect of Nottingham prison have been discussed with local Members of Parliament and they will be kept informed of progress. My right hon. and noble Friend Lord Williams will be meeting representatives from Nottingham on Monday 14 June 1999.

Behaviour Orders

Mr. Coaker: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what guidance he has issued to local authorities on what constitutes anti-social behaviour under the behaviour orders under the Crime and Disorder Act 1998; how he will monitor the *(a)* use and *(b)* effectiveness of (i) behaviour orders, (ii) curfews and (iii) parenting orders; and what action he will take to encourage the use of such orders by (1) the police and (2) local authorities. [85671]

Mr. Boateng: We published comprehensive guidance on the use of anti-social behaviour orders earlier this year "Crime and Disorder Act 1998: Anti-Social Behaviour Orders—Guidance". This included guidance on the types of case in which such orders might be considered. A review of the use and effectiveness of anti-social behaviour orders is planned during the first two years of their availability.

The local child curfew scheme will help address the problems of unsupervised children who are out on the streets late at night, and who may be involved in anti-social behaviour.

We intend to carry out a monitoring exercise of the local child curfew scheme to assess how the practical arrangements work in those areas which decide to operate such a scheme. This will help identify good practice, particularly in the area of multi-agency working, which will be required for the enforcement arrangements.

The parenting order is the subject of an 18-month pilot scheme, which began on 30 September 1993. This involves monitoring and evaluating the use made of the order. The results of the pilot project will inform the process of national implementation and help to identify good practice which can be reflected in guidance and national standards.

The decision to apply for anti-social behaviour orders or local child curfew schemes is one which must be taken by the police or local authority as appropriate, but we shall continue to encourage their use whenever the opportunity to do so arises. Parenting orders are available to the courts and do not depend upon any application being made by either the police or the local authority.

CCTV

Mr. Cohen: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what representations he has received relating to the reliability of CCTV cameras in providing evidence in speeding cases. [86027]

Mr. Boateng: We have received no representations on this subject. No Closed Circuit Television systems have been granted type approval for police to use in the enforcement of speed limits.

Asylum Seekers

Fiona Mactaggart: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department (1) how many people who were *(a)* recognised as refugees, *(b)* granted exceptional leave and *(c)* refused asylum, in each year from 1991, were (i) female and (ii) male; [86121]

(2) how many asylum applicants in each year from 1991 were *(a)* female and *(b)* male. [86120]

Mr. Mike O'Brien: The information requested is given in the table.

Applications received for asylum in the United Kingdom and decisions [1], excluding dependents, by gender [2] 1991 to 1998

	Year of application							
	1991	*1992*	*1993*	*1994*	*1995*	*1996*	*1997*	*1998*
Applications received								
Total	44,840	24,605	22,370	32,830	43,965	29,640	32,500	46,015
Of which:								
Male (percentage)	80	70	67	69	71	71	75	78
Female (percentage)	20	30	33	31	29	29	25	22

Decisions in year [3,4]

Recognised as a refugee and granted asylum

	Year of decision							
	1991	1992	1993	1994	1995	1996	1997	1998
Total	505	1,115	1,590	825	1,295	2,240	3,985	5,345
Of which:								
Male (percentage)	71	82	80	78	72	68	73	70
Female (percentage)	29	18	20	22	28	32	27	30
Not recognised as a refugee but granted exceptional leave								
Total	2,190	15,325	11,125	3,660	4,410	5,055	3,115	3,910
Of which:								
Male (percentage)	81	76	71	57	59	60	68	78
Female (percentage)	19	24	29	43	41	40	32	22
Refused asylum and exceptional leave								
Total	3,380	18,465	10,690	16,500	21,300	31,670	28,945	22,315
Of which:								
Male (percentage)	84	84	81	75	76	75	73	76
Female (percentage)	16	16	19	25	24	25	27	24

[1] Numbers rounded to the nearest 5 and percentages to the nearest 1 per cent.
[2] Estimates based on records for which this information is held centrally.
[3] Decisions may not relate to applications made in the same period.
[4] Information is of initial determination decisions, excluding the outcome of appeals or other subsequent decisions.

Search and Detention Powers

Mr. Mitchell: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department under what powers officers at the frontier of the common travel area of the United Kingdom and Ireland are entitled to *(a)* question, *(b)* examine the belongings of, *(c)* search the person of and *(d)* detain a citizen of the European Union or European Economic Area or their accompanying relatives. [86229]

Mr. Mike O'Brien: European Economic Area (EEA) nationals are normally admitted to the United Kingdom on production of a valid passport or identity card as

evidence of nationality and identity, in accordance with Article 3(1) of the Immigration (European Economic Area) Order 1994 and subject to Article 15(1) of the Order. Under Article 3(3) of the Immigration (European Economic Area) Order 1994, a family member of an EEA national who is not himself an EEA national may in addition be required to hold an EEA family permit issued abroad.

Powers for immigration officers to question passengers arriving in the United Kingdom, whether they are citizens of the European Union, or European Economic Area, or their accompanying (third country) relatives, are contained in paragraph 2 of Schedule 2 to the Immigration Act 1971. Schedule 2 applies to the examination of European Economic Area (EEA) nationals in accordance with Article 20(2)(e) of the Immigration (European Economic Area) Order 1994. Under paragraph 4(3) of Schedule 2 to the Immigration Act 1971, a person who is examined under paragraph 2 of Schedule 2 to the Immigration Act 1971 may be searched, and his belongings examined, and that person may be detained under paragraph 16 of Schedule 2 of the Immigration Act 1971.

The operation of immigration controls in the Republic of Ireland is a matter for the Irish authorities.

EU (Corruption)

Mr. Mitchell: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department when a draft of the Convention on the Fight Against Corruption involving officials of the European Communities or officials of member states of the European Union, (Cm 4266) published in April was first published; and what scrutiny of it is planned to be conducted in either House of Parliament. [86234]

Kate Hoey: The Council of the European Union adopted the Convention on the Fight against Corruption Involving Officials of the European Communities or Officials of Member States of the European Union on 26 May 1997. It was first published in the Official Journal of the European Communities on 25 June 1997.

Prior to its adoption by the Council, the Convention had been considered in draft and cleared from scrutiny by the House of Lords European Communities Committee.

The Government published the Convention on 16 April 1999 with an Explanatory Memorandum, as a Command Paper in the European Communities Series, and laid it for 21 sitting days in both Houses in accordance with the Ponsonby rule. Arrangements are under way for the United Kingdom to ratify the Convention by September. We expect to be among the first Member States to do so.

European Communities Financial Interests

Mr. Mitchell: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department (1) if he will list in respect of the Convention on the Protection of the European Communities Financial Interests and subsequent protocols (i) the dates of promulgation and signature, (ii) the dates of draft and final publication in the United Kingdom, (iii) any relevant parliamentary proceedings and (iv) the dates of coming into force; [85679]

(2) what plans he has to amend the criminal law and procedures in respect of the Convention on the Protection of the European Communities' Financial Interests relating to international criminal fraud, and its protocols. [85680]

Kate Hoey: The Council of the European Union adopted and signed the Convention on the Protection of the European Communities' Financial Interests (the Fraud Convention) on 26 July 1995. The three protocols were adopted and signed on 27 September 1996, 29 November 1996 and 19 June 1997.

The Government published the Convention and its protocols on 16 May 1999 as Command Papers in the European Communities Series, and laid them for 21 sitting days in both Houses in accordance with the Ponsonby rule.

Prior to adoption the Convention and its protocols had been submitted for, and cleared from, parliamentary scrutiny.

The Convention will enter into force 90 days after the Secretary-General of the Council receives notice that it has been ratified by the last Member State of the European Union. The same rule applies to each of the protocols, except that they cannot enter into force before the Convention.

Following the recent commencement of Part I of the Criminal Justice Act 1993, which was brought into force on 1 June 1999, and of equivalent provisions of the Criminal Justice (Northern Ireland) Order 1996, which were brought into force on the same date, no further changes to criminal law are needed in the United Kingdom in order to satisfy the requirements of the Convention and protocols. Arrangements are under way for the United Kingdom to ratify the Convention and protocols by September.

Witness Protection (Eltham)

Mr. Sayeed: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many officers are currently deployed on witness protection duties in the Eltham Police Division. [86194]

Kate Hoey: This is an operational matter for the Commissioner of Police of the Metropolis. He tells me that in his view the information requested should not be published, in order to help maintain operational effectiveness.

EDUCATION AND EMPLOYMENT

"Youth and Europe—Our Future"

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment if he will place a copy of the European Presidency memorandum, Youth and Europe—Our Future, in the Library. [86365]

Mr. Andrew Smith: Copies of the German EU Presidency's memorandum have been placed in the Library.

Sure Start

Mr. Coaker: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what progress he is making with the Sure Start programme; when *(a)* the application

for the second round of Sure Start bids will be announced and *(b)* the application brochures will be sent to local authorities; who can bid for Sure Start funding; and when the closing date is for the next round. [85670]

Ms Jowell: Guidance inviting 60 areas of the country to apply for funding was published on 19 January. It was sent to key players across the country including local authorities. On 9 April, the Government announced the first 21 of these Sure Start programmes to be given funding. A further announcement concerning the others will be made soon.

The Government hope to announce the next round of applications in the autumn when Guidance will be sent to local authorities and other providers of services for young children.

Funding

Mr. Healey: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment if he will list, and place in the Library in machine-readable form, for *(a)* 1997–98, *(b)* 1998–99 and *(c)* 1999–2000 the revenue grants falling within the aggregate external finance, other than revenue support grant, allocated by his Department to (i) each local authority, (ii) in aggregate, to each class of local authority and (iii) in aggregate to England; and in the case of each local authority the total of such grants. [85757]

Ms Estelle Morris: Details of the revenue grants within aggregate external finance other than revenue support grant for 1997–98, 1998–99 and 1999–2000, for each local education authority, each class of local authority and for England as a whole are given in tables that have been placed in the Library in both paper and machine-readable form. For Grants for Education Support and Training in 1997–98 and the Standards Fund in 1998–99 and 1999–2000 the figures shown in the tables include the grant made by the Department and the contribution made by the local education authority.

Mr. Healey: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment if he will list, and place in the Library in machine-readable form, for *(a)* 1997–98, *(b)* 1998–99 and *(c)* 1999–2000 the support for capital expenditure allocated by his Department (i) to each local authority, (ii) in aggregate to each class of local authority and (iii) in aggregate to England, showing each capital grant and borrowing approval separately, and the total of that support. [85758]

Mr. Charles Clarke: The information requested is shown in three tables, copies of which have been placed in the Library in both paper and machine-readable form.

Correspondence

Mr. Kaufman: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment when he intends to reply to the letter dated 22 April from the right hon. Member for Manchester, Gorton with regard to Mr. W. Jackson, 32 Westbourne Range. [86410]

Mr. Mudie: A reply will be issued today.

Class Sizes

Helen Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what progress has been made in reducing the size of infant classes in South Gloucestershire. [86983]

Ms Estelle Morris: During the debate on primary schools on 19 May 1999, *Official Report*, column 1035, I gave the hon. Member for Northavon (Mr. Webb) figures relating to infant class size reductions in South Gloucestershire. The correct figures show that the number of pupils in infant classes of over 30 fell from 3,391 in January 1998 to 1,387 in September 1998. The projected number of children in infant classes of over 30 for September 1999 is 326.

Business Links

Mr. Cotter: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what was the total value of grants from TECs to Business Links in each of the last three financial years. [86667]

Mr. Mudie: The following table provides the total expenditure by TEC/CCTEs on Enterprise and Business support activities which includes, but is not solely, expenditure on Business Links.

£ million

Financial year	*Expenditure*
1995–96	81
1996–97	111
1997–98	142
1998–99	Not yet available

Employee Training (Government Grants)

Dr. Kumar: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment if he will list the Government funds allocated to private sector companies for the provision of training for employees in the form of *(a)* capital grants and *(b)* infrastructure grants in each of the last three years; and if he will make a statement. [78303]

Mr. Wills: I have been asked to reply.

The Government do not fund private sector companies for training employees through capital grants. The Government do support private sector companies through infrastructure grants, including the SRB, but it would involve a disproportionate cost to identify the amount of funds from this source used for training employees.

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PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES

OFFICIAL REPORT

SIXTH SERIES **VOLUME 332**

SESSION 1998–99

24th May—11th June 1999

SCOPE OF THE INDEX, ARRANGEMENT AND ABBREVIATIONS

This index to the daily parts and weekly Hansard is derived from the House of Commons Library's Parliamentary On-Line Indexing Service (POLIS), and the subject terms used are based on those used in POLIS. There are often changes in column numbering, etc., between the daily part or weekly Hansard (which simply collects together the daily parts without revision) and the bound volume. The index for the bound volume is revised to take account of these changes, and cannot, therefore, be used in conjunction with the daily part or weekly Hansard. For these versions use the Fortnightly Index.

Scope and arrangement of the Index

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Abbreviations

Bills 1R = first reading, 2R = second reading, Com = Committee stage, Rep = Report stage, 3R = third reading, res = resolution, amendt/amendts = amendment/amendments, * = matter taken formally, without debate.

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